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THE GLORY OF DON RAMIRO

ENRIQUE LARRETA

THE GLORY
OF DON RAMIRO
A LIFE IN THE TIMES OF
PHILIP II.

TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH

BY

L. B. WALTON



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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

WITH the inexhaustible mine of Spanish history and tradition at their disposal, it is surprising that Spanish writers, while excelling in the novel of manners, should have produced comparatively few historical novels of outstanding merit. With the notable exception of the late Benito Pérez Galdós—and even he is remembered as the creator of the *Novelas Contemporáneas* rather than the *Episodios Nacionales*—Spain has produced no real master in this genre, and it is interesting to note that Galdós confined himself in the main to the nineteenth century and the years immediately preceding it, treating, in many cases, of events within living memory.

The Spanish historical novel of the conventional type was, during the nineteenth century, essentially derivative; during the early period of the romantic movement the influence of Scott was predominant, while in the latter half of the last century Spanish writers sought their inspiration in the works of Dumas. It has been left to a Spanish-American contemporary, the diplomatic representative of the Argentine Republic in Paris, to produce an original masterpiece.

Larreta has chosen his field wisely—the most fascinating period in the history of the most romantic of

European nations, and the work is all the more interesting in that it deals with a political and economic phase in the development of national life which finds a parallel in the state of Europe as we know it to-day. The historical picture is drawn with startling vividness.

But *La Gloria de Don Ramiro* is more than a history; it is first and foremost a novel of distinction: whatever his theme, one feels that Larreta would use the scrupulous care of a scholar and an artist. In an age of advertisement and commercialised art, *La Gloria de Don Ramiro* has the rare virtue of classical dignity and restraint. Unhappily the limpid beauty of the Castilian can be appreciated only in the original, and in the case of a novel of this type, which owes much of its appeal to qualities of style, the task of the translator is one of extreme difficulty. He would here like to apologise for the innumerable defects in his work.

In the matter of explanatory footnotes, which have been inserted only where absolutely necessary, brevity has had to be the first consideration. They give only an approximate rendering of the Spanish and do not profess to be an exhaustive gloss upon the words to which they refer.

In cases where a literal translation of the Spanish has been incompatible with tolérable English, the translator has endeavoured, while following the original as closely as possible, to recognise the claims of style.

L. B. WALTON.

EDINBURGH, March 1924.

NOTE

La Gloria de Don Ramiro, by Enrique Larreta, of which this book is a translation, was first published in Madrid in 1908. A translation into French, by Rémy de Gourmont, was first published in Paris in 1910. In 1915 there appeared in Paris an *édition de luxe* of the French translation with a Preface by Maurice Barrés and illustrations by P. E. Vibert.

PART I

THE GLORY OF DON RAMIRO

PART I

I

RAMIRO was wont to remain until nightfall in the top-most chamber of the tower, listening to the tales and gossip of the women.

There the stern discipline of the manor was relaxed. There one could laugh and sing and there, on fair-weather days, the outer air entered freely through the open casements, bringing in its train a vague perfume of country fires and the dull murmur of mills and rammers on the banks of the Adaja.

What a blessed respite for the boy, to find himself at last remote from the stern glances of his grandfather, to be far away above those silent halls of the manor where lamps and candelabra burned the whole day long, halls peopled only by the figures on the tapestries, funereal court-rooms, dim with incense, rooms which his mother, dressed eternally in mourning black, would cross and re-cross like a shadow.

The servants adored him. They would look with respectful pity upon this beautiful, melancholy child, not yet in his thirteenth year, this child who seemed to bear upon his forehead the mark of some mysterious grief. They vied with one another in fondling and caressing him. During working hours, amid the murmuring of the distaffs, they would talk to him of simple things, things which he could understand, and, nearly always, when night had fallen, they would tell stories, old, old

stories of no time and of no country, gloomy sometimes, sometimes miraculous, enchanting. They would tell of hidden treasure, of omens, of princesses and anchorites. An old slave woman, whose forehead still bore the mark of her branding, could tell tales of apparitions. And Ramiro would listen to her with strange attention, ever more eager for terrors and for mysteries.

The room was a vast apartment which occupied almost the entire storey of the tower. The time-worn gilt upon the rafters had not altogether lost its lustre and the frieze of scutcheons which bordered the four walls preserved untarnished its gleam of gules and vert. In the darkest corner there slumbered silently an ancient, dilapidated loom which no one had ever thought of repairing, moth-eaten, cobweb-riden, and yet preserving among its stanchions the threads of a piece of bolting-cloth commenced, perhaps, in the preceding reign.

Each window formed a deep recess in the thickness of the walls, with a stone seat. Upon one of these seats Ramiro, his elbow on the sill, would pass long hours in gazing out over the countryside.

The window which faced north-east commanded a view of almost the entire town. Seen from that height Ávila de los Santos, sloping towards the Adaja and engirdled by its stout, red-turreted wall, seemed more like some huge castle built upon the rock than a city. The boy would let his eyes roam over the corrals, the *patios*,¹ the green courts of the cloisters and the steeples of the churches. Near by, where the ground was highest, the cathedral raised its fortress-tower to heaven, turreted and gray.

From the other window a marvellous landscape could be seen: the Valle Ambles, the entire plain, the long, wide stretch of pasture land, the river, the mountains. Saving the line of trees which marked the course of the river, the vegetation was scanty, and scattered oaks, black in the distance, appeared as rare and isolated

¹ Courtyards.

specks upon the stony slopes of the hills. A landscape harsh in colour, arid, mineral, scorched far and wide by the torrid rays of the sun, a landscape calm and austere as the soul of a monk. A sudden gleam revealed here and there among the ash trees and willows the course of the Adaja, winding over the sandy soil like a bright, unravelled thread of silver. Far in the distance, the Sierra de Ávila flaunted its snowclad peaks to the skies. A mass of cloud could usually be discerned behind the Serrota, or the Zapatero, like steam rising from a giant saucepan, casting its shadow over the peaks and decking the slopes from end to end with long, vaporous wreaths of mist.

This evening the women were engaged in mending vestments. Seated upon wicker mats, they spread out the old robes on the ground, renewing their tarnished threads, re-embroidering their faded garlands, their eucharistic symbols, the pictures of the saints and, occasionally, a verse from the Koran, woven into the fabric by the Moorish craftsman. A pious task this—for these chasubles, these altar-hangings belonged to the monasteries, and had not the monks assured the workers that every stitch was equal in the sight of God to one bead of the rosary? Gothic velvets there were which fell in sharp, angular folds, fine, stiff velvets of the reign of Fernando and Isabella, velvets upon which were skilfully embroidered the tenuous, delicate outlines of a pomegranate on a background of green or crimson; graceful cloth of silver which seemed to have caught within its weft the sheen of some old moonbeam; brocades and silken stuffs, veiled by the dust of time, like old stained-glass windows. The light of the setting sun lent a rare splendour to all these precious things, its rays striking obliquely the multi-coloured silks whose tints had matured like old vintages in the chests of sacristies. The sky was growing dark. Gusts of ashen shadow seemed to drift in from without and settle about the room, while Ramiro, seated at one of the windows,

watched the twilight sinking to its death. Away below in the narrow streets it was already night.

The summit of the turreted wall was bathed in a purple glow, lending a coral hue to the pine trunks in the orchards. A light had just appeared in the window of a neighbouring house and there, in sharp outline, could be seen, pacing to and fro, an hidalgo saying his Hours. A profound melancholy seemed to envelop this city of strife and prayer, while in the evening calm the boy thought he could hear the singing of some distant choir, a faint, ghostly chanting—perchance the Augustinian nuns. From time to time, it seemed as though a breath from heaven stirred the voices, causing them to tremble like the flame of a taper in the wind.

Ramiro recalled the stories which his mother had told him of Purgatory and Paradise. . . .

Almost every evening, before the ringing of the Angelus, an old steward would come into the room. You could not mistake the sound of his footsteps on the staircase—and yet he would appear in startling fashion, banging open the door with his fist. Then, his cloak grotesquely lifted up behind by the point of his sword, he would doff his hat, sweeping the ground with its plumes and saluting the serving-maids as though they had been Infantas of Spain. He usually seated himself upon a large chest, upholstered in yellow baize, and when his boots were muddy he would walk across to the brazier to dry their soles.

A native of Turégano in Old Castile, he had, as a mere boy, stabbed to death the son of an alguazil, and, after four years' imprisonment, had opposed his parents in their wish to apprentice him to a silversmith, and run away from home for ever. His intense dislike for manual labour of any description and his unconquerable taste for vagabondage had led him to adopt a military career. He had spent more than half his days in the service of the Emperor Charles V and the reigning monarch Don Philip II, aboard galleys and galleons, lightly armed

for executing reprisals upon undefended towns, or falling unexpectedly upon some goodly Turkish cargo. Well did he know the isles of the Levant and all the ins and outs of the bays. The itch, the bubonic plague, the shameful maladies of ports, pike wounds, sabre slashes, arrow scratches, blows and burnings gleaned during assaults, were the spices which had gone to the seasoning of his adventurous life of combat upon land and sea. Twice had he been at the point of death upon the gallows. In 1560 he was captured by the Turks in the battle of Gelves. Carried off to Constantinople and forced to take an oar in a galley engaged in the transportation of materials for the sultan's palace, he was one of those who stoned their guards to death and made off with the boat to the coast of Sicily. His habit of being constantly on the watch for attacks as sharp and sudden as the peck of some savage bird, had given him a look of energy and determination. His eyes were gray as a vulture's, with hard, round pupils, and in their depths his pride still smouldered like a live coal, as in the days when he had clanked his Castilian spurs along the streets of Naples. His life-story was a long succession of more or less creditable exploits; but in his haughty indolence he had never sought to rise above the rank of private soldier. Now, in his old age, he had donned the steward's glove, and resigned himself to the peaceful task of accompanying noble ladies on their excursions through the streets.

In addition to the stories of his own escapades, he would regale the servants with snatches from romances of chivalry and fabulous legends of Ávila and Segovia. He knew barbers' songs and pilgrims' chanties, the rhymed life of the Moor Abindarráez, and innumerable ballads which he would sing in his discordant voice to the accompaniment of a guitar, turning up the whites of his eyes the while in imitation of the blind minstrels.

Upon his forehead, deeply bronzed by the sun and wind of the sea, there glowed a terrible, livid scar.

This evening he had scarcely seated himself upon the chest and started to retail some gossip of the market-place, when one of the servants, drawing a finger across her eyebrows, asked him:

“Tell me, Señor Medrano, who gave you that garland?”

The steward lowered his eyes for a moment without making any reply. Then, taking from his sheepskin pouch a large red handkerchief, he loudly blew his nose. This was usually the prelude to a lengthy story.

Ramiro, who was now leaning against the old soldier’s knees, toyed, as was his wont, with the latter’s sword, trying the edge, scrutinising the stains upon the blade, or brandishing the weapon with childish pride. When he noticed the pensive expression upon the old man’s face he let the sword fall to the ground and, leaning both hands upon the heavy hilt, prepared to listen attentively.

Medrano began rather sulkily. It was an old story of the Gelves disaster. He spoke slowly, his voice reverberating like the beat of a slackened drum. The tears welled up into his eyes as he recalled that shameful day.

He described the rout of the Christian vessels when the Turkish armada was unexpectedly sighted. Some ran aground upon the sand-banks; others, in their frantic eagerness to escape at top speed, broke their yard-arms; others surrendered without even putting up a fight. He, Medrano, happily for his honour, was posted in the fort. He then recounted the horrors of the siege, the unheard-of diseases, the ghastly wounds, hunger, thirst. . . . He told of men who broke camp at night in order to devour the corpses of the Turks; of maddened women gnawing one another’s breasts; of Spanish mothers who threw themselves from the walls with their children in their arms. When the general, Don Álvaro de Sande, undertook his fatal sally he, Medrano, was among those chosen to accompany him. He rose to his feet to describe more graphically those moments of desperate conflict:

"We were on the point of reaching the galleys," he said. "The Moorish musketeers, after exhausting all their powder, could do us no harm, and we had them well under control with our pikes. But one of them—believe it or no as you please—hurled himself upon the point of my halberd and, spitted as he was, right through the belly, took a few steps and managed to get near enough to me and—'sdeath!—split my forehead—like this. . . . But let us say no more of that," he exclaimed, and, his face distorted with hatred, resumed his seat upon the chest.

One of the servants began to hum to herself:

"The Gelves, Mother, are not good to take!"

But the old soldier went on without appearing to hear her:

"When will Christian men rid themselves of this spawn of hell? Sometimes I say to myself: Who, if ever it comes to that, who will curb their onslaughts now that Don Juan de Lepanto is no more?"

When he heard this last sentence, Ramiro, leaving the old man's side and flourishing the sword, cried lustily:

"Why, as for that, I shall do all that Don Juan did, if the king wills it so."

Some of the servants smiled and the child, looking them fiercely in the eyes, exclaimed again, stamping violently upon the floor:

"I—I shall do the same, I say—and even more, with the help of God and the Virgin."

Meanwhile the door at the foot of the staircase behind him had just been opened and a pale, beautiful woman, dressed entirely in black, had quietly entered the room. It was Doña Guiomar, Ramiro's mother. Her eyes gleamed in the shadow as though wet with recent tears and her voice, too low, perhaps, grew stern and solemn:

"Already have I warned thee several times, Medrano, that Ramiro has no need of thy bombastic talk. Why hast thou given him thy sword?"

The child, turning towards her, hastened to reply:

"He did not want to do so, mother. I took it from him."

"Those, my son," replied Doña Guiomar, "are not the weapons which thou wilt have to wield when thou hast entered the service of God and His Holy Church. Rather would I have seen in thy hands some holy book than that piece of steel."

The child was silent for a moment as he watched her touch her eyes with her kerchief. Then he at once threw down the sword and ran to her side.

"And 'tis for that thou art weeping?" he asked.

"No, my son," answered the mother, overcome with grief, "bad tidings have also brought sorrow upon me. Mother Teresa de Ahumada is no more. Saint that she was, she has now entered into the glory of God. She died the day before yesterday, at Alba de Tormes."

A murmur of groans and sighs made itself heard in the darkness of the room. Some of the women were weeping.

The sun had just disappeared below the horizon and softly, tenderly, the Angelus sounded from the belfries of the churches, a chorus, an incessant lamentation, a mournful chaunting of bells in the twilight calm. It seemed as though the city itself ascended miraculously to heaven with its prayers in one throbbing, metallic peal of sound.

Doña Guiomar fell upon her knees, intoning the words of the Angelus. They all followed suit, preparing themselves to respond. The steward stammered out the Aves, raising his face to heaven and clasping his hands like a child.

The open windows allowed a twilight peace to enter with the first languid shudder of the night.

II

ÍÑIGO DE LA Hoz and his daughter Guiomar had settled at Ávila in the year 1570, coming from Valsain, near Segovia, the seat of their family domain. The journey was the outcome of a sudden decision, and one rainy October morning the green-baize-covered carriage, drawn by horses whose harness bore no bells, entered the city through the Mercado Grande gate, about one hour after sunrise.

Thenceforth father and daughter led a mysterious life in Ávila. They left the house, in their covered chairs, only at a very early hour of the morning in order to hear early Mass in neighbouring sanctuaries, each kneeling on their own side of the church.

The old manor in which they lived was inherited, together with three hundred acres of land in the Valle Ambles, from the hidalgo's mother, Doña Brianda del Águila. It was situated in a small square, only a few paces distant from the Gate of Evil Fortune. A square, stone tower occupied the south-east corner, silhouetting against the sky its imposing crown of cupolas and Moorish turrets—a haughty, frowning mass, stained here and there with a reddish, rust-like deposit. It was perforated in haphazard fashion by dungeon windows. A moulding of pearl formation, symbolising perhaps the beads of the rosary, adorned the base of the four watch-towers and, here and there, a window ledge. The rest of the building was poor and barbarous. Huge, irregular stones, scorched black by the sun, protruded through the thick crust of mortar on the walls. Close to the ground, an oblique loophole, like the eye of some enormous padlock, had in olden days been used by archers to defend the gate. The grilles were jagged and sombre in appearance.

The gateway, one of those impressive, lordly portals so common in Ávila de los Caballeros, embraced practically

the whole width of the tower. Its lintel was made of huge keystones, all in one piece, forming a semicircle, framed by a rectangular Gothic moulding. On both sides, in each of the corners, a carved scutcheon blazoned forth in its several quarters the arms of the chief families in Ávila: the eagle of the Águilas, the bezants of the Blázquez, the chevron and martlet of the Bracamontes. The woodwork of the door was studded with gorgeous nails, and a carved knocker, stolen perhaps from some Andalusian *alcázar*,¹ hung from the postern. To the right of and above the first, another knocker made it possible for a horseman to summon the inhabitants without dismounting. In the hall a lamp burned continually before a large image of the Virgin, with the dead Christ reclining on her lap.

The court formed a spacious rectangle, surrounded by cloistral galleries whose sole ornament consisted in the scutcheons carved upon the capitals. Tall, rank brushwood sprang up everywhere, leaving bare only a few small spaces littered with broken tiles which, scattered about among clumps of weed, called to mind the ossuary of some ruined convent.

The hidalgo had never thought of restoring order to that wilderness, in which he loved to roam as in some desert spot. At times he would pace to and fro in the sunshine, terrifying the butterflies by the noise of his footsteps; at times he would allow whole hours to pass, leaning upon the curb of the old well, lost in thought, gazing at his own countenance reflected in the deep, circular mirror of the water. For the old man those galleries held many lingering memories; the very air seemed hushed, as though impregnated with a rustic calm, a monastic silence.

Father and daughter inhabited only the topmost storey of the manor, over which splendour and negligence held a dual sway. Along the dust-laden galleries, where the Flemish tapestries unfolded their gloomy lore,

¹ Castle; a Moorish palace.

hung old family portraits. Manorial furniture of every description, some belonging to the house, some brought from Valsaín by the hidalgo, lined the walls of the room. As one trod upon the daises, the loose and broken tiles jingled beneath the rich Turkey carpets. Cloth-of-gold canopies and brocades, harbouring dust and cob-webs in their ancient folds, adorned the worm-eaten ancestral couches. The windows were rarely opened; but censers of chased silver stifled with their incessant fumes the stale, mousy odour of the room.

Buried from dawn until sunset in the manorial library, Don Iñigo would while away the dead hours in reading or meditation. He had brought with him from Segovia a large number of Spanish chronicles, many romances of chivalry, not a few books of devotion, the *Epistles* of Seneca, the *De Officiis* of Cicero, a Sallust, a Valerius Maximus, a Virgil and some treatises upon celestial mathematics, in addition to an armillary sphere with its zodiac of bronze. To these must be added the manuscripts and printed books which he discovered from time to time in the house. Among them were various huge Arabic tomes which he immediately caused to be burned in the middle of the courtyard, in the presence of a canon of the cathedral.

Soon the volumes were scattered in untidy heaps upon the floor. Rarely was a volume replaced once the hidalgo had removed it from its shelf. What was the use? So few were the years of life which now remained to him. His attacks of gout recurred ever in more rapid succession. A secret, feverish malady was slowly sapping his vital humours, clogging up his spleen. At times he would be overcome by drowsiness, and through his half-opened lips there would escape nightmare mutterings, as though the violence of his dreaming had evoked memories of bygone days.

He always dressed in black or gray, with no adornment other than the golden star and the scarlet insignia of Santiago, embroidered upon all his cloaks and jerkins.

In winter, observing scrupulously the ancient dictates of his Order, he wore as the only covering for his feet a pair of rough sheepskin sandals. He observed two Lents in the year; the first from the day of Quatuor Coronatum until Christmas, the second from Quinquagesima until Easter.

He was slight in build, his face yellow as a lemon, wrinkled like a bunch of raisins. His short moustache, still dark, contrasted sharply with his whitening beard. His eyes were greenish, monkish, melancholy; his temper, sullen. He believed himself to be descended from a King of Aragón, and would trace back his name, etymologically, to a Roman consul. The cartularies of Segovia invariably mentioned some ancestor of his in connection with the annual jousts against the Moors of Jaén, Andújar and Seville.

Until he was fifty-two, despising all work as unworthy of his aristocratic hands, and living exclusively upon the rents of his domains, together with the golden crowns which, one by one, he would extract from his coffers, he led a quiet, retired life on his estate at Valsaín or in his "Casa de los Picos" at Segovia. Meanwhile no event of any note took place other than his marriage to a lady of an illustrious Ávilian family, who died in childbirth a year after the wedding.

Scarcely, however, had the Moorish insurrection of 1586 broken out, when Don Iñigo, feeling an atavistic rancour stir in his blood, summoned his friends and relations to his house and informed them in an eloquent harangue of the imperious duty which was theirs to succour the king in his struggle with the infidel dogs. Many made up their minds to join him, and then, like some paladin of old, he exhausted the major part of his fortune in equipping a very armada at his own expense.

Under the Marquis of Mondéjar he distinguished himself in battle by an unbridled fury, which on more than one occasion might well have cost him his life, hurling himself upon the enemy single-handed in the rage of

pursuit. He proclaimed war without quarter and universal castration for the Moors.

He it was who, by means of indescribable tortures, forced the famous chief Aben-Djahvar to disclose the whereabouts of two caches in the Sierra Nevada. During the skirmish of Alfajaralí he was wounded in the middle of his forehead by a curved dagger which a Moor, one of those who fought with a rose garland upon their brows as a token of martyrdom, had hurled at him from a distance. In the thick of the campaign, however, he was obliged to retire to his estate, unsaddled by a terrible attack of the gout. Shortly afterwards he received the cloak of Santiago as a reward for his services.

In his declining years, when tortured by grief and anxiety, he would console himself by recalling his prowess in that fierce and bloody vintage in the Alpujarras. He had inherited from his ancestors an heroic sentiment of honour and a lordly contempt for all occupations which involved pecuniary gain. In Ávila, as in Segovia, he disdained to undertake the management of his own estates, entrusting it, together with the keys of his strong-boxes, and the duties of *maestresala*,¹ to a Flemish majordomo, whose probity he thought to ensure from time to time by means of some chivalrous demonstration of confidence or some aphorism from the *Partidas*. Apart from some skins of Madrigal wine, there were in the house no victuals of any description, and the servants would make continual expeditions into the neighbouring towns in order to purchase on credit the necessary provisions.

Pecuniary embarrassments quickly supervened: but the hidalgo, whose hauteur would not permit him to demean himself by the practice of a cheeseparing economy, pledged his valuables one by one with the Genoese. If the crisis was acute he would cause a piece of tapestry to be removed, negotiate some precious stone, or pay his debts with pieces from his large stock

¹ Chief waiter and taster at a nobleman's table.

of plate which, cast in the mines of America, represented an enormous sum of money. He was, however, extremely temperate in his habits. Bacon soup, served in a padlocked cauldron to defend it from the voracity of the pages, an egg, and some puff-paste stuffed with hash and seasoned with pepper, was sufficient to constitute a meal. Sometimes, on Fridays, as a kind of ritual, he would drink a glass of wine and nibble a few mouthfuls of pork in order to differentiate himself from Moors and Jews.

III

GUIOMAR and Don Iñigo met only at dinner and supper. The old man, seated at the head of the table, and his daughter at the foot, between Ramiro and the chaplain, spoke no word throughout the meal. In this awful silence any sound, the clatter of the silver, the footsteps of a page, the cry of the peddlers in the street, would awaken a solemn echo.

Upon rising from the table the old man, when his gout permitted him, would stride for a few moments up and down the room. Guiomar and her son would huddle together by the brazier. Only the ticking of the clock broke the silence. No one uttered a word. It would have been difficult to say at first whether this reserve was inspired by some hidden antipathy or by some common sorrow. They enquired after one another's health through the servants. For Guiomar her chamber next to the oratory had all the austerity of a monastic cell, and when she passed through the other rooms she had the air of one who visits a strange house. In her train there lingered an atmosphere of suppressed anguish. Her old ardour, the very lustre of her eyes, which she had been wont to preserve by means of an affected trembling of the lids, had fled prematurely from her careworn face

and the conventional gown of black had banished for ever the gay taffetas and graceful *basquiñas*¹ of her girlhood.

She was not yet fifteen when Don Iñigo betrothed her to his cousin Lope de Alcántara, to whom he was doubly bound by a fraternal affection and a noble rivalry in loyalty and sacrifice. The said Lope was a gentleman of fifty years or thereabouts, melancholy in appearance, his sole adornment the most uncompromising virtue. The girl was quite unable to overcome her cordial dislike for him, but incapable of crossing her father's iron will, she resigned herself to be offered as a guerdon of that exemplary friendship which had become the talk of Segovia.

Like all young girls of gentle birth, she had been forbidden at an early age to read novels of chivalry—with which the house was filled to overflowing. They had been described to her as works of pure vanity, subtly provocative of sin. For that reason, perhaps, she had begun to take them furtively, one by one, from the shelves of the paternal library in order to gloat over them at night, in bed, by the light of a candle, when the rest of the house was asleep. These bizarre stories affected her like some magic philtre. Already she thought of little else but quixotic and noble cavaliers who, perchance, might come to liberate her and carry her off far, far away, upon the croup of their palfreys. She now began to live in a voluptuous dream, filled by the assignations and seductions of the novels, day-dreaming, oblivious of the ordinary life around her, making absurd replies when questioned and passing her hand over objects like one who walks in her sleep and knows not what she is seeking. She acquired a taste for perfumes, embroidered waist-bands, tassels and pearls. She tended her hands and her tresses with unwonted care. Her confessors warned her; but the warning came too late.

One summer afternoon in Segovia, as from the windows of her chamber she watched the twilight draw its purple

¹ Upper skirts.

veil over the valley of the Eresma, she saw passing along the street a proud gallant who stopped to cast a glance at her. He wore the uniform of a soldier, his hat surmounted by a flowing plume. A dagger, inlaid with precious stones, gleamed upon his breeches of slashed silk. This mute scene was re-enacted on many occasions. On certain evenings a tearful, anguished voice could be heard singing beneath her window to the accompaniment of a *guzla*.¹ Came soon the inevitable letter wrapped around a stone. At last the hooks of a silken ladder appeared over the edge of her balcony, and her lips drank in, above Segovia now asleep, the swooning rapture of the first nocturnal kiss.

After she had completely surrendered herself to her sin, and the first signs of maternity had sobered the ecstatic intoxication of passion, she thought to have lost her reason. Overwhelmed by despair, she confessed everything to her father. Meanwhile the seducer made his escape from Segovia, and to Medrano was entrusted the task of pursuit. Shortly afterwards, at Arévalo, the unknown libertine accosted the steward, declaring his name and his race. He was a *morisco*.²

“Tell thy master,” he exclaimed, as he took his leave, “that I wished to defile his honour in order to avenge my father, Aben-Djahvar the Bold, who, in Almería, suffered unspeakable torments at his hands; but that if he will consent to my marriage with his daughter I will cast myself at his feet.”

The hidalgo, when he received that terrible message, hurled himself upon Guiomar with his dagger drawn to strike. Attacked, however, by a sudden faintness, and thinking that he was about to die, he cursed the fruit which ripened in her womb. Terrible indeed were the days that followed. Lope de Alcántara was told everything and, when he had heard the appalling truth from his friend’s own lips, instead of showing bitter resentment he insisted, in a frenzy of love and loyalty, that

¹ A one-stringed instrument.

² A Spanish Moor.

the betrothal should be consummated without delay. Three days after the marriage he left for Flanders. Some months later Don Iñigo received a letter from his friend Sancho Dávila informing him of the noble way in which his son-in-law had sacrificed his life in an encounter with the Huguenots of France.

Guionar, as though she had plunged both hands into the wound which so terrible a grief had opened in her breast, seemed to shed of her own free will that culpable excess of blood whose ardour had stained her virtue. A sickly pallor overspread her countenance. Her hands gleamed strangely white against the mourning black, and her soul leaped forth to meet the ray of hope which shone from heaven. In spite of her pregnancy, she submitted her body to the most terrible penances, imitating, so far as was possible within the walls of the house, the new reforms of the Carmelite Order.

When the time of her parturition drew near, Don Iñigo decided to change his place of residence and they left Segovia to establish themselves permanently at Ávila de los Santos. There Ramiro was brought into the world on the 21st of December, St. Thomas's Day, in the year 1570, Saturn in his ruling house and Aquarius and Capricorn in the ascendant.

IV

BREATHING that gloomy air of the cloister and the cell, without relaxations, without a companion of his own age, in the charge of taciturn beings who nearly always spoke in hushed tones, Ramiro, with the instinctive resignation of childhood, passed the dark days of his infancy. The slightest of childish advances, his very smiles, were invariably met by a finger on the lips. At the age of seven he relapsed into a gloomy state of silence, passing whole hours in some secluded nook, his hands immobile, his glance sorrowful. There was

something inhuman in the contrast between his tender features and the deep furrow upon his forehead, laden, so it seemed, with the cares of maturity.

From his earliest years his mother had brought him up in abject submission to an inexorable routine of devotion. Every day he would go with her to early Mass in the Church of San Juan or Santo Domingo, and she taught him to say difficult prayers which confused his mind, to mutter interminable litanies, calculated to make Satan squirm in impotence. For his own especial use, she also gave him a Rosary of the Fifteen Mysteries, such as is worn by monks. He had to kiss the ground humbly before the images of Our Lady of Carmel and touch with his lips the scapularies of priests in order to gain indulgences.

After his first communion the severity of the routine was intensified. Doña Guiomar would now punish his slightest naughtiness with ascetic penances, inculcating in his soul a contempt for all worldly things and a terror of evil-doing. Every night, at his bedside, she would read from the *Flos Sanctorum* the life-story of the saint whose day it was and, at times, setting down the book, she would herself recount the miracles of some pious nun of the city, or the works and prodigies of St. Teresa, of whom, on her mother's side, she was a lineal descendant. She would tell him of the daily conversations which that holy woman held with Our Lord, and how, in the midst of her prayers, the breath of the Holy Spirit suddenly descended upon her, raising her body several inches from the ground. The mother told such stories in trembling accents which, as they fell upon the night air, seemed to disseminate a sacred and awful odour of sanctity.

During the greater part of the day he was left to do exactly as he pleased. His grandfather never addressed a word to him. Meanwhile the child would roam about the house and gaze out of the windows at the boys playing in the square, or go up into the workroom on the top

storey of the tower, or down into the pages' quarters in the yard, regaling the youths with dainties culled from his own repasts. When they saw him coming they would rush to the door, smiling greedily. The large room, which resembled a Moorish tavern, was full of leathern chests and iron boxes, dating apparently from the time of the Cid. Narrow mattresses covered with filthy blankets were scattered about the floor. As you entered, a warm, acrid odour assailed your nostrils. The floor was always strewn with scraps of garlic and torn playing-cards. Some of the servants would spend several hours of the day in this apartment, dozing or gambling as though in an ale-house. Hanging from the walls could be seen the gaudy liveries of taffetas or velvet striped with silver.

Sometimes Ramiro would investigate the gloomy kitchen, the oven in which the bread was baked, large enough to supply a convent; the granary where the sacks containing the tithes of wheat were stored, or, descending a stone staircase to the right of the door, he would go to fondle the mules and the pony in the underground stables.

The coach-house could only boast of one vehicle—the green-baize-covered carriage brought from Segovia. It emerged only in the summer, when its owners retired to their country house in the Valle de Ambles. During the rest of the year it remained, totally abandoned, in the gloomy shed. The child would go there every day to look for the egg which a mysterious hen used to lay upon the cushions of bronze morocco leather.

When he had attained the age of ten, it seemed as though the hand of God had fallen upon Ramiro. His mother saw him withdraw himself into an austere seclusion, like one predestined. Often, from behind a door, she would hear him intone with passionate fervour religious pæans which burned upon his lips like a flame, often she would watch him busied for hours on end in copying out the most noteworthy events in the lives of Jesus Christ and His Holy Mother, observing how he

always wrote the name of the Redeemer in letters of gold and that of Our Lady in letters of azure. She was now firmly convinced of his vocation and, as even to her it seemed imprudent for him to continue in that cloistered life which had struck the roses from his cheeks, she decided to allow the steward to take him out occasionally for walks.

Medrano would appear shortly after noon, and the child, attired by the maids in his black velvet coat, silver-buckled shoes, purple cap, clean white ruff, and short sword, would run to bid his mother good-bye. She would carefully part his hair at the side, Spanish fashion, and, making him say an Ave and a Paternoster, would dismiss him with a kiss.

Thus did Ramiro come to know the city, its suburbs and its environs. It was a continual revelation to his eyes, wearied by the monotony of the old house. A great zest for life in all its manifestations suddenly took possession of his soul. The proud walls, too, spoke to him in a language legendary and heroic, and the temples, with their gloomy sepulchres, talked to him of human glory and the pride of birth. As the steward constantly frequented the society of certain clerics in the parish, the boy would often hear, in the ante-rooms of sacristies, tales of the city and its ancient traditions. In this way his retentive memory stored up amazing histories, which were to be of use to him later on in currying favour with serving-maids or in obtaining hospitality cheaply at inns and pastrycooks' shops. Ramiro profited by this tenacious knowledge. The old soldier illustrated his remarks in the presence of the objects themselves, deciphering in his own way the inscriptions and pointing out with imperturbability the site of great events. Thus did Ramiro hear of the tragic loves of the famous knight Nalvillo and the Moorish maiden Aja Galiana.

It was the steward also who, before the Gate of Evil Fortune, told him for the first time the story of the sixty hostages of Ávila, whose heads King Alfonso, El Batal-

lador, caused to be served in oil; and that of the haughty abnegation of Blasco Ximeno, who went to challenge the treacherous and perjured monarch in his own camp.

The story of Ximena Blázquez and her amazing prowess was related upon one of the huge towers of the Puerta de San Vicente; and Ramiro never gazed up at the wall without calling to mind the stratagem which she employed in the absence of the *caballeros*. Seeing the Almorávides approaching, she ascended to the battlements together with other townswomen, all wearing broad-brimmed hats and false beards. Thus did she succeed in terrifying the infidels who, imagining the fortress to be well defended, immediately took to their heels.

Medrano had numerous friends in Ávila; but were it a question of sharing a gourd of San Martín or raking up a handful of doubloons in an emergency, his most generous comrade was the Portuguese, Diego Franco, bell-ringer at the cathedral, who, after working as a wool-dresser in Segovia, had held the post of tabourer at Bruges and Antwerp, whence he had returned with a passion for bells. Every call they made upon this "Bachelor of Bell-ringing," as the steward called him, away up in the tower of the church, was a treat for Ramiro. So soon as they had crossed the threshold of the church, Ramiro would tug at a rope concealed behind the door and, almost immediately, away up aloft, at what seemed to his childish eyes to be a giddy height, there would appear at a loophole in the vaulting the diminutive countenance of a man or a woman. Shortly afterwards the sound of footsteps would be heard within a gigantic pillar, a bolt would creak, and the little door on the right would open, to disclose the bell-ringer or his wife carrying a bunch of keys in one hand and a lighted lantern in the other. Then they would climb the steps within the hollow column. The stairs were so steep that Ramiro was obliged to make the ascent on

all-fours. At infrequent intervals a sunbeam, stained by the coloured glass and redolent of incense, would strike through a single narrow loophole.

The guests were usually entertained upon the summit of the flat, squat tower, in a shed with a tiled roof, each member of the party reclining at full length upon the boards of a sty, in which the couple kept half a dozen pigs, all black as pitch. Ramiro would amuse himself by investigating the mysteries of the vaulting or by contemplating from that high altitude the city and the horizon, his whole being aglow with a desire to embark upon some fantastic flight.

Franco was an undersized little creature who, when preoccupied, would nervously chew the ends of his moustache. His wife, Aldonza González, nicknamed "the Extremaduran," was, on the contrary, a sturdy, well-built woman who rang the two large bells and left the *clarillos* and the *esquilones* to her husband.

Sometimes, when a peal of more than usual importance had to be sounded, all four would mount to the summit of the tower. The steward would lend a helping hand, and Ramiro, although shaken to the marrow, delighted in the terrific detonations which threatened to bring down the belfry and suck him like a wisp of straw into a whirlwind of sound. Aldonza, in the enthusiasm of her efforts, would reveal a glimpse of bare leg above her stockings. She had only just escaped being beautiful. Her complexion was soft and creamy, her lips scarlet as a Candeleda *pimento*; ¹ but her rebellious hair, and her skin, downy as a boy's, bore witness to the masculine boldness of her temper. She treated her husband like a slave, venting upon him the superabundant energy which the pure, invigorating air of the towers secreted in her blood. Ramiro would cast shy glances at her from time to time, and she was passionately devoted to the child. Occasionally, when no one was looking, she would take him in her arms, set him upon a stool, and endeavour

¹ Grain of red pepper.

to excite him and make him laugh by means of violent ticklings and squeezings.

The steward preferred to spend his holidays in his own retreat, playing a game of cards with his friends. When he took the boy with him, he would at once send for his daughter, Casilda, a graceful child to whose beauty and charm every member of the circle had fallen a victim. She looked like an abandoned princess in a fairy tale. Her mother was a Spaniard of Amalfi, whom the steward had abducted one night after wounding her father and killing one of her brothers. When rescued two years later she had preferred to die under the torture rather than reveal the name of her seducer. Medrano's retreat comprised two rooms and a tiny garden in an old ruined mansion behind the Church of San Pedro.

For all her sweetness and beauty, Ramiro always treated Casilda with haughty disdain. She would hang in wide-eyed admiration upon every word he uttered, carefully removing from his clothes any stains of dust or chalk, kissing his hands the while. When they played together in the garden, it was she who ran to find the pebble from the sling, or the arrow from the improvised cross-bow, while he stood watching, erect and haughty. Sometimes, however, when bidding her good-bye, Ramiro had touched the little ragged gipsy's mouth with his lips, and this purely mechanical caress had, in the course of time, come to arouse in him a strange, delightful sensation, reminding him of the acrid flavour of fallen fruit.

V

AFTER residing in Ávila for more than nine years, the only person with whom Don Iñigo had deigned to form a friendship was the Caballero Don Alonso Blázquez Serrano. Their estates in the Valle Ambles were contiguous, and their wives were both members of the Aguila family, so they had not been long in making one

another's acquaintance. It would have been impossible to discover among the noble families of the town a more illustrious lineage than that of the Blázquezs. Their history was more abundant in great deeds and great loves than a novel of chivalry. Don Alonso was directly descended, on his father's side, from Ximeno Blázquez, the *adalid*,¹ first governor and mayor of the city, when it was re-populated by Count Raymond of Burgundy. He could count among his ancestors Blasco Ximeno, "he of the challenge"; Ximena Blázquez, "she of the *sombreros*"; and the famous Nalvillo, husband of the Saracen, Aja Galiana, whose fame was equal to that of the Cid himself. An ancient ruling of the council stipulated that whenever cavalry in the king's service rode out from the city "their captain or chief should be a descendant of the noble Blasco Ximeno, 'he of the challenge,' and no man of any other lineage. Their standard bearer and their lieutenant should also be of the same stock."

In the old Church of San Pedro you can see the family chapel of the Serranos and their emblazoned sepulchres, now worn with age. The house of Serrano was not less ancient than that of the Blázquezs. Don Alonso had the right to bear upon his shield five lilies alternating with white crosses on a field argent, or the lions rampant on a field azure. Honours had always abounded in his family. His palace, which he had inherited from his wife, was situated to the north of the city, united with the walls, in accordance with the immemorial tradition of the noblest houses. One of the turrets rose from the centre of the orchard, and the Águilas had always been entrusted with its defence. The hidalgo spent only a small portion of the year on his estate, for the capital had an irresistible fascination for him, and the quiet, monastic life of Ávila de los Santos, where the endless hours would drag wearily by, uninterrupted by any sound of life save the pealing of a bell or the crowing of a cock, depressed

¹ Chieftain; commander.

him and made him feel as though he were being held in captivity.

Apart from the battle of Lepanto in which, armed with the broad rapier of a *guzmán*,¹ he had bravely fought upon the prow of a galley, receiving in his shoulder an arquebuse ball and in his thigh a wound from a lance, his life was not remarkable for any memorable action. He had spent the major part of it as a court official. When eighteen years of age he had been page to Ruy Gómez de Silva, and at the age of thirty was made groom-in-waiting to the king, who later granted him the Order of Calatrava as a reward for his bravery at sea.

After studying at Salamanca, he had spent two years in Milan and three in Venice. Any mention of the latter city still threw him into a state of almost delirious excitement, and he would take a delight in discoursing upon art, referring frequently to his conversations with Tintoretto, of whom he had been an intimate friend. Latin, and the sweet speech of Tuscany, were as familiar to him as his native tongue, and when he was alone among his books he would take down the *Metamorphoses* or the *Gerusalemme Liberata* in preference to the rude Epistles of St. Paul. It was common knowledge that he had promised to provide at his own expense, as a gift to the chapter of the cathedral, the Gothic door of the Apostles with a Græco-Roman peristyle. The drawers of his bureaus were full of poetical essays — odes to Chloris and Galatea in the manner of Boscán and Garcilaso. He had completed a translation of *El Laberinto de Amor*, written a gloss upon each one of Petrarch's sonnets, and was now engaged upon a happy imitation of Sannazaro's *Arcadia*. The desolate and austere landscape which surrounded his native city was, in his opinion, not worth a line.

The elaborate clothes then in fashion, the incessant bowing, the atmosphere of salons and the ceremonious

¹ Nobleman who served in the royal forces.

interchange of extravagant and insincere compliments, the *styrax*, the histrionic tittivations of courtly life, aggravated by those exquisite refinements with which, according to Don Iñigo, "the cunning malignity of foreigners enticed the Spaniards in order to undermine their native valour," had eventually succeeded in bedaubing the stern, Castilian fibre of Don Alonso with a meretricious veneer. But you were not slow to discover that a soul straight and clean as a rapier lay concealed beneath the embroidered velvet of his ceremonial sheath of etiquette, and that in affairs of honour he was as punctilious as his ancestors had been before him who, booted and spurred, now slept their eternal sleep in the Cathedral of San Pedro. In the course of time, however, he had fallen a prey to that fine and exquisite sensuality, that taste for luxury and good living, which the brilliant and voluptuous Italians had diffused throughout the kingdoms of Europe. He took an especial delight in exquisite objects, the pomp and ceremony of courts, his large retinue of servants. Great wealth, in his opinion, derived its value from the power it possessed to liberate one from the base necessity of earning it. It rendered possible the free development of the human spirit. Of a lofty and magnanimous disposition, he believed that every human action should be crowned, as the plume crowns the helmet, with a resplendent gesture.

He dressed luxuriously, laughing all sumptuary edicts to scorn. No courtier wore a longer sword than he, none could boast of a larger or loftier ruff. He had his brocades and embroidered stuffs woven in Milan, on the pattern of old models in the family wardrobe, and Florentine lapidaries alone were by him thought worthy to carve the onyx and the cornelian for his signet rings or the pommel of his short swords.

In his youth he had for some years been infatuated with the young wife of a councillor of Castile, and the court had loudly applauded the *beau geste* when he gave

two thousand golden crowns to the leech who attended his mistress in exchange for a handkerchief stained with her blood. He had been an intimate friend of Antonio Pérez, and counted upon the friendship to procure him, when a vacancy occurred, a seat in the Council of Italy. His passion for all rare and exquisite things was deeply sincere, but at the same time he was well aware that the open cultivation of such a taste added an incomparable lustre to the life of a nobleman and, from an early period in his life, he had set to work with the aid of his friends in Milan and Venice to transform his mansion into a veritable treasure-house. The objects which made the most subtle appeal to the imagination of the hidalgo were his pieces of rare glass and his ivories. The latter, with their gilded sheen, cold to the touch, powdery, would arouse in him an indescribable enthusiasm. He would remove them caressingly from their cases and hold them up to the light, as though his hands recognised in that pale, aristocratic material, fired into a ruddy glow by the rays of the sun, a substance of like nature to their own.

In the centre of the largest room, upon the huge tables inlaid with tiny mirrors, the platters, the vases, the goblets of Venetian glass mingled in haphazard fashion their tenuous, almost immaterial symmetries, and the crystal, lined with quicksilver, reflected their splendour like a pool of clear water. Some of these objects had, as though by a miracle, enjoyed a life of more than one hundred years' duration. Articles of the previous century, archetypes of an innumerable progeny, had been adorned with grotesque masks and bizarre animals by the burins of Vistori, Ballorino, Beroviero, in the great romantic period of glass-work. Turgid crystals of a greenish, muddy hue, like the water of canals from which they seemed to have derived their fantastic quality, afforded to the touch a better education than did the ivories, and Don Alonso handled them with infinite care, as though the slightest rough movement would

kill them. A friend of his, a painter of the Venetian school, who went by the name of El Greco, had taught him how to examine them, after nightfall, in the light of a moonbeam. The moonlight would fire the delicate substance into a phosphorescent glow. Then, as though a drop from some magic philtre had fallen upon his eyes, it seemed to Don Alonso that he inhaled the fragrance of the night upon the waters, saw the shining, scaly furrows in the wake of ships, the turquoise whiteness of palace walls the gloomy depths of tiny canals, buried in mystery. Thus, by virtue of this illusive crystal, did the hidalgo fancy himself transported from his arid, dusty Castile to the city of lagoons where, in his mask of black or green, he had spent so many unforgettable hours.

Between Don Iñigo and Don Alonso Blázquez Serrano there quickly sprang up one of those cordial and intimate friendships which so often unite two discontented spirits. One would denounce, in haughty and prophetic tones, the policy of the monarch who, while undermining the ancient privileges of the nobility, tolerated in his Catholic kingdom the loathsome pest of the *moriscos*. The other, casting furtive glances towards the door, would tell of base deeds and foul crimes rewarded by great honours and consideration at court.

One day, after taking leave of his host, Blázquez Serrano came across Ramiro in the antechamber. The child was seated upon a high, carved chair, and his eyes seemed to be directed with fixed attention upon some doleful creation of his own brain. You would have taken him for a young prince under the influence of some spell.

Beneath Don Alonso's masculine austerity there lay a heart capable of deep and tender feeling, and now the tears sprang to his eyes as though he had been a woman. He had never paid very much attention to Ramiro; but when he saw him now, plunged into so deep a melancholy, he was filled with a strange compassion the cause

of which he himself would have been unable to explain. From that time he began to take an interest in the boy, and on the following day sent his dwarf to look for him.

He had Ramiro shown over the whole house, the orchard, the ramparts; and himself introduced the boy to his daughter Beatrice, a delicious little lady of ten, who, seated upon a blue cushion and surrounded by her duennas, received them in a large, dark room, fragrant with incense.

When the child had risen to her feet, Ramiro ran towards her with outstretched arms, but she motioned him back with a grave curtsey. The boy trembled with profound, indescribable emotion. The dwarf touched him upon the shoulder and they went out.

VI

THE domains of Don Iñigo de la Hoz, in the Valle Ambles, were situated almost at the foot of the Sierra, about a quarter of a league to the west of Sonssoles. They had originally comprised a piece of forest land and three hundred acres of cultivated ground, but on account of their owner's financial embarrassments they had rapidly shrunk in size until they were at length reduced to a dense oak plantation and a narrow strip of meadow, at one end of which stood the dilapidated mansion of Doña Brianda's parents. Cistus, lavender and rank weeds had invaded the gardens, whose walks could now be distinguished only by the alignment of the trees. It was difficult to force a passage through the wood, for Nature, tamed and held in subjection for many long years, now defended herself by means of jungle growths, brushwood and thorns. By way of compensation, from the high windows of the chateau one could see Don Alonso's beautifully tended orchard, with its ponds and its hedges of privet and myrtle, trimmed in the fantastic style of Italian gardens. One could also distinguish the

famous balustrades, designed by the hidalgo himself, with their mosaics of white, black and parti-coloured stones, illustrating stories from Ovid. On certain evenings the fountains spouted jets of water into the rosy air, sprinkling the staircases and the foliage with their drops.

Ramiro soon grew to love the free, unfettered life which he led on the estate. When he was thirteen years old, Medrano, who lodged with his daughter Casilda in the lower storey of the granary, gave him his first lessons in the art of horsemanship, on an old hack borrowed from a peasant. Then, improvising a light lance with his streamers and the ribbons of his epaulettes, he would teach the boy how to wield it, and on certain nights, by the light of a candle, he would train him to fence with his own shadow, showing him how to lower and raise his hand to the level of his ear so that he might learn to attack gallantly.

Medrano kept two swords by his bedside: one narrow and excessively long, with an open-work guard; the other with a broad, two-edged blade and a heavy, grizzled hilt.

“This steel is virgin,” he remarked, pointing to his fine squire’s rapier, “and does not yet know what it is to be plunged up to the hilt in human flesh, but that one yonder,” he added, lovingly taking down the *joyosa*¹ of his soldiering days, “has drawn more blood than a leech and sent more souls to heaven than a nun. With it I have searched the guts of more than one sturdy knave, broken the skull of more than one rival and cut I know not how many Turkish throats.”

Ramiro would listen to him in dazed admiration, and when he grasped the sword himself his heart seemed to swell within his breast.

Then the fencing lessons began. The steward would feel the boy’s tiny muscles and, as they grew stronger, teach him those mysterious tricks to which every soldier

¹ A kind of sword.

who reaches old age attributes his good fortune. On certain days, at siesta time, the two of them, evading the vigilance of Doña Guiomar, would go in search of a shady spot in the forest. The child would inhale with infinite delight the smoke of the rustic fires which were usually burning in the neighbouring domain. Their fragrance and the sunlight would throw him into a kind of ecstasy. Medrano, seating himself in the shade of some tree, would remain silent for a moment, everything about him motionless save the scarlet plume upon his hat which fluttered in the breeze. But soon, inspired by the prospect of the valley whose clear expanse reminded him of the luminous tranquillity of the ocean, he would begin to tell the story of the capture of some powerful galleon or some bold landing on the Levantine coast. Not a single gesture, not a single word escaped Ramiro, and at times the fury of the struggle would present itself so vividly to his imagination that he fancied himself present upon the deck of the ship, or among the steeds and scimitars of the infidels.

Sometimes, however, he would let the steward talk on without listening to him and, entirely self-absorbed, fix his great eyes upon the walls of the city, whose ruddy, tessellated shadow encircled the opposite side of the valley like some huge iron crown. He would then dream that he was destined to cover his native city with a new and Christian glory, and that some day he would be hailed as supreme over all in valour and renown.

Some novels of chivalry and one or two treatises on horsemanship which, to her surprise, she had found upon the desk in his room, informed the mother of what was passing in her child's mind. She talked the matter over with the chaplain, an old Franciscan friar, who also acted as tutor to Ramiro, and he advised the remedies which Holy Church prescribes: penance, solitude and prayer.

The child submitted himself humbly to his elders, filled with a pious unrest.

VII

It was one of those days of intense, tropical heat from which, in spite of its situation on a high, wind-swept plateau, the whole of that region of Castile does not escape. The torrid air slumbers heavily in the valleys and the cloudless sky glows with an added intensity, like enamel in the furnace. The rocks groan under the fury of the sun, the trees are scorched black. At intervals along the roads, a drove of mules or a flock of sheep raises a huge cloud of dust, like an army on the march.

A fierce, flinty haze floated over the Valle de Ambles, and the implacable glare lent an added austerity to the countryside. It was threshing time, and the grain gleamed brightly on the floors. The labourers were obliged to abandon their work repeatedly in order to refresh themselves in the shade of the waggons. In the meantime, some would lazily wield their forks, while others, erect and rigid as posts on the threshing platforms, angrily goaded the mules and oxen, dismounting every now and then in order to rain blows upon their heads and buttocks with their cudgels.

Ramiro, weary of pious books, had stolen the *Adventures of Silves de la Selva* from the shelves and ensconced himself in a shady nook in the forest, under the shadow of an oak sheltered by three huge rocks. Lying at full length upon the ground, his chin supported upon his clenched fist, he would occasionally look up from his reading in order the better to enjoy the cool beauty of his retreat. From time to time a sunbeam would strike through the leaves, throwing upon the pages of his book a shimmering medallion of light. This shady spot had for him the fascination of that earthy freshness peculiar to water which has been stored in porous, unglazed jars.

Suddenly the sound of hasty footsteps impelled him

to raise his head. He looked round. It was Medrano, running along the footpath which was used as a short cut to the house.

“Where are you going?” he shouted.

The steward motioned him to follow. Once in his room in the granary, Medrano, as he hunted for his sword belt, told the boy what had happened. Cerberus, the huge mastiff who guarded the gates of the neighbouring estate, had gone mad. He had bitten a lackey and dashed off in the direction of the forest. Don Alonso was then in Madrid, and his daughter had remained with the duennas, who had sent for Medrano to lead the peasants in the hunt for the dog. Ramiro experienced a sudden thrill of excitement. He remembered the young knights in the legends who used to behead dragons, monsters and fierce lions, rescuing princesses, raising spells and enchantments. At the same time, as in a vision, the face of Beatrice rose before his eyes. Just as the steward was about to gird on his broad, two-edged sword, Ramiro, without saying a word, placed both hands upon the hilt and gazed up into the servant’s face with an expression at once imploring and determined. The old soldier understood. Then, taking the longest sword for himself, he put the other in Ramiro’s hands, and exclaiming:

“We must make haste, for they are awaiting us yonder,” left the room.

They arrived at Don Alonso’s mansion without encountering anyone upon the way. All the shutters were tightly closed, as though the house were deserted, but as they passed by the granary they came across six men armed with staves and pitchforks. The steward gave his orders. Each man was to climb to a certain point on the mountain, and he who first saw the animal was to utter three loud cries for help. As for Ramiro, he was posted within a few paces of the kitchens with a hunting horn, on the understanding that he did not budge an inch from that spot.

A little later, Ramiro, tired of waiting, began to make his way through the trees. A host of stories to which he had listened in the tower of the manor had not left him ignorant as to the perils of hydrophobia, and he well knew how great was the fear which that greedy muzzle, harbinger of madness and death, would spread throughout the villages of the countryside. All bolts would be drawn. All the cats, dogs and asses would be herded together in the farmyards, and while the women lit the votive candles, one to St. Catherine and one to St. Quiterfa, the saints to be invoked against madness, the youths would bravely sally forth into the country, armed with such sharp instruments as they could find.

Ramiro made rapid progress, vaulting nimbly over rocks and heaps of old branches. The swamp-oaks and the buckthorns could not shield the pale and shrivelled earth from the scorching rays of the sun. The air was fragrant with the perfume of lavender, rock-roses and thyme. The yellow gorse peeped out here and there between the leaden rocks, its petals gleaming gold against the indigo sky.

Ramiro was panting. The sweat poured down his cheeks.

Half an hour later, one of Beatrice's maids saw Don Iñigo's grandson enter the courtyard of the mansion, holding in one hand a sword, its wide blade stained with blood, and in the other the mastiff's head.

"God and St. Quiterfa help me—they have slain him!" the woman cried. Then, gazing intently at the bloody carcass, she added:

"Poor Cerberus!—how he used to jump up and put his paws upon my breast to lick my face. But it had to end—a mad dog knows not his own master. This is Medrano's work, of course."

"No, it was not Medrano."

"Who, then, was it?"

"I was walking all alone in the forest when, just as I

was passing by a heap of faggots, I saw him running towards me. I rolled him over like a ball, with one good blow of my sword. Then I cut off his head."

"Holy Virgin—what a terror he will be when his beard has grown!" exclaimed the woman, astonished that the little boy had killed the terrible brute single-handed.

Then she bade him follow her; but Ramiro, running to a loophole which looked out on to the countryside, leaned his sword against the wall and, taking the horn, blew three times with all his might. The three long notes echoed and re-echoed among the hills like a legendary summons.

The servant led him through a series of gloomy apartments until, at last, when they reached a half-opened door, Ramiro heard a chorus of female voices invoking St. Quitería and St. Catherine. They entered the room. A solitary ray of sunlight entered through a half-closed shutter. What a clamour in the darkness when the child lifted into the light of the sunbeam the bloody head from which crimson drops trickled one by one to the carpet! One of the duennas fell prostrate upon the floor, attacked by a sudden faintness.

The woman who had brought Ramiro in gleefully related the story of the boy's prowess. Then, amid a dead silence, Beatrice came straight towards him. A duenna tugged at her petticoat; but Don Alonso's daughter, as she gazed upon those hands which Ramiro's youthful courage had so prematurely stained with blood, unpinned a blue ribbon which adorned her hair and, approaching the boy, knotted it in the epaulettes of his doublet with her tiny, trembling hands, pale as moonbeams.

VIII

ALL at once Ramiro knew the rapture of first love. His dream surpassed reality; and that sudden delirious bliss was reflected in the colour, the rhythm, the perfume of all created things. His religious fervour and his desire for glory lay like young greyhounds at the feet of his passion. The pale face of Beatrice, with her large, mournful eyes and long eyelashes, now gazed out at him from the pages of his prayer-book, from the curtains about his bed, from the very Crucifix itself, to which he would confide the anguish of his love: a capricious, will-o'-the-wisp-like phantom in whose presence his heart would melt with an unutterable tenderness. He began to compose ballads and elegies which might have been dedicated to Our Lady, and long, magniloquent speeches to be addressed to his beloved on the earliest possible occasion. Sometimes, at nights, he would extinguish the light in his room and spend whole hours in leaning upon the window-sill, gazing out over the old garden as it lay buried in a sombre, fragrant silence; or, his eyes raised to the sky, he would look up into the heavens. Nothing could excite his passion like the sumptuous mystery of the stars, and it seemed to him that they strove by their uneasy twinkling to address him in a sublime language which he could not understand. He would then dream of death, and of a re-birth, together with Beatrice, into those ineffable regions where he would wander alone with her, breathing the divine zephyrs which fanned the trembling stars.

For some days his mind was unhinged. His cheeks grew waxen-pale, and he himself was astounded at his incessant sighs and the profound anguish of his love-tormented heart.

Sometimes, in the morning, he would take his crossbow and go to shoot pigeons in the enclosure which separated the two domains, his eyes fixed steadily upon

the neighbouring house. How powerful was the spell which the lattices, calling to mind the dreams of his beloved, could cast upon his soul, there in the freshness of the morning, alive with the song of birds!

One afternoon, through a gap in the foliage, he saw Beatrice passing by, her eyes fixed upon the hedge. Ramiro revealed himself, and the girl beckoned him cautiously to follow her. When she fancied that she had eluded the vigilance of the duennas, she invited him to come into her garden. They greeted one another with a low, ceremonious bow, as though they had met in a drawing-room. Ramiro found himself unable to stammer out a single one of the ingenious phrases which he had composed for her benefit.

This pretty game was played again on many occasions. They would walk hand-in-hand, scarcely speaking a word, gazing from time to time into one another's eyes, without a smile. The girl would take him to the most shady and secluded spots, and there Nature, in the butterflies, in the birds, in the tiniest insects, revealed to them her impure innocence. The magic of desire throbbed, panted, cried aloud to them in the sultry summer silence.

Ramiro never forgot a certain occasion when, while walking with her through the green labyrinth of foliage, he had ventured to put his arm around her neck and gently stroke her throat. On another occasion Beatrice clambered on to an old swing and began to rock herself furiously, in a sudden abandonment of youthful joy. Her quick, sudden peals of excited laughter winged their way through the air like a flight of thrushes, awakening echoes among the trees. The wind played unforgettably in the folds of her skirts.

The trembling of their voices grew more intense at every meeting, their tones stranger. The most casual remark had a disturbing effect upon their thoughts. He, casting proud glances at her, dreamed of the joy that would be his when he became sole and absolute

master of that delicious being. He regarded Beatrice as corn now safely harvested, out of all danger. And yet he asked her one day:

“Would you like to marry me—soon?”

“I am so little,” she replied. “Are you already thinking of such things?”

She then began to hum to herself, lowering her eyes as though she would surrender on the spot her cheeks and lips rather than that mad little spirit which danced in her head like the clapper of a tiny bell.

Ramiro’s bliss was not of long duration. About three-quarters of a league away, in the direction of Villatoro, there lived, during the summer, Urraca Blázquez de San Vicente and her two sons. Her husband, Philip de San Vicente, Commissary of the Holy Office and member of the Council of Orders, spent the greater part of the year in Madrid. The two boys were the scourge of this part of the sierra. They always went about together, and hated one another cordially. Once or twice during the week they came to visit their cousin Beatrice, galloping along the roads like two demons as fast as their horses could carry them, and followed in the far distance by their old tutor who, enveloped in a white cloud of dust, furiously spurred on his mule. They would repeat, especially the younger one, the oaths and gross jests of the peasants. Obscene words were always upon their lips, and they burned, both of them, with the importunate, carnal desire of adolescence.

Beatrice preferred the elder one, who was fair and handsome. She already enjoyed to the full, however, the truly feminine delight of holding out hopes to the pair of them.

Ramiro, who was now a regular visitor at her house, met them there on several occasions and discovered, to his bitter astonishment, that Beatrice did not exist for himself alone. He noticed soft glances, whisperings, and his mind conjured up the possible outcome of this family intimacy. His pride, nevertheless, proved

stronger than his jealousy. He appeared, outwardly, calm, silent, even cheerful.

One evening towards the end of August, the steward came in to tell him that Gonzalo, the elder brother, was talking with Beatrice under the trees.

Ramiro went to spy upon them through the branches. He spent a long time peering into every corner of the neighbouring garden. Suddenly, even before he himself properly understood the reason, he trembled from head to foot. He looked again. Yes—there in front of him, quite near, were Beatrice and her cousin, lying on their backs upon the grass, under the shade of an elm. The young man had put his cheek against the girl's, his arm was around her neck, while she, plucking the petals from a blood-red carnation, was smiling voluptuously.

Mad with rage, Ramiro would have liked to force his way through the thorny hedge—but all his efforts proved unavailing. A terrible, discordant cry burst from his lips.

Gonzalo and Beatrice got up and ran away.

IX

EARLY that winter, Doña Guiomar, anxious to see her son in the bosom of Holy Church, decided to hasten on his studies so that she might send him as soon as possible to the “College of the Archbishop” at Salamanca.

Up to that time Ramiro's only tutors had been Doña Guiomar herself, who had taught him his alphabet, and, later, for elementary Latin grammar, a Franciscan friar from the monastery of San Antonio. This friar, a man of about seventy-five years of age, was no mean scholar but, as he was not long for this world, he performed his tutorial duties with a disdainful tolerance, frequently dozing off to sleep in the middle of a lesson. He would say to his pupil:

“Ask, ask, my child, for I am not the one to hide from

thee the little I have gleaned from books. But forget not that these crumbs of knowledge which the learned, be they Christian or Gentile, have left to us, will be of no service to thee in Purgatory."

He always endeavoured to instil into his pupil's mind a contempt for the things of this world, bringing to the task an eloquence such as few advocates of asceticism possessed. When he spoke of mundane glory and our fleeting days on earth, his words, pregnant with monkish irony, insinuated themselves into every fibre of your being, like some glacial narcotic which puts desire to sleep. It was said that more than one sinner had, after hearing one of his sermons, rushed off to a monastery to beg for a cowl and a cell. Apart from prayer and penance, all the things of the world were to him as dust and ashes, and our insatiable ambition as a spider's web spun over the nest of a slumbering bird.

He would usually make Ramiro translate passages from Thomas à Kempis, and in this way the youth stored up in the depths of his soul those words of solitude, sublime disdain and passionate self-abandonment.

At the farther end of the cathedral, after crossing the small *patio* where the censers are kindled and the canonical chocolate is prepared, you mount a pinewood staircase leading to a series of rooms into which the light of day never fully penetrates. In one of these apartments, from two o'clock until four in the afternoon, by the light of a lamp with three wicks, his feet resting upon the studded dais of a brazier, Ramiro began his lessons with the new tutor, whom his mother had chosen upon the advice of the Franciscan monk himself.

His name was Lorenzo Vargas Orozco, and he held the office of *canónigo lectoral*¹ in the Iglesia Mayor. He had known Don Iñigo and his daughter ever since the morning upon which he had been summoned to superintend the burning of the Arabic manuscripts in the courtyard. His father had met an heroic death as a captain of

¹ Prebendary.

arquebusiers in the Flanders campaigns. He was of a good height, his eyes large and somewhat prominent. The bristles of his beard, for he was always unshaven, gave a blue tinge to the lower part of his face. His fellow-canons envied him, among other things, his striking gestures in the pulpit and the curious manner in which he toyed with the folds of his gown, the divers ways he had of drawing it about him, throwing it open again suddenly like a military cape, as though he were about to draw his sword with manly courage.

His first lesson was a very gateway to wisdom. Standing erect in the centre of the room, he pointed to a pile of large volumes, bound in parchment, which lay upon his desk, and began:

“You have here, my son, stored in skins, like rare wine, all the precious essence of knowledge, sacred and profane. My long wanderings in the land of philosophy have convinced me that everything which tends to divert us from the doctrines of the ‘Angel of the Schools’ leads our minds astray, with grave danger of their falling headlong into heresy.”

Ramiro, although he did not understand a word, nodded assent and, glancing at the folios, saw that they all bore the same title: *Summa Theologiae*, in large, antique lettering.

“This work, this monument, this tabernacle,” the Canon went on, “also summarises, tested and purified in the crucible of St. Thomas, all the wisdom of the Stagirite; but in order to inculcate a due veneration of that other admirable philosopher and to defend you against certain ideas which are, verily, the plague of the Schools, I will now read to you, as a *vestibulum*, an opuscule which I have just composed in refutation of Pedro Pomponacio and certain Spaniards who, in accordance with the peculiar tenets of Alexander Aphrodiseus, affirm that Aristotle believed and taught that the rational soul dies with the body.”

After removing the snuffers which served as a book-

mark, he took from the table a manuscript volume. Then he seated himself by the lamp, fixed his spectacles firmly upon his nose, and began to read his peripatetic *apologia*.

Ramiro was quite unable to conceal his surprise, and his face bore unmistakable signs of bewilderment.

“Do not be perturbed,” the Canon remarked, in conclusion, “if you have not grasped the sense upon a first hearing. To-morrow I shall deliver an explanatory lecture.”

He had been a scholar in three languages at Salamanca, after which he had studied Arts and Theology. In all Spain, perhaps, there could not have been found another canon who knew the Holy Scriptures as he did. His commentaries upon the Old and New Testaments attracted to the church, every Monday and Friday, the most learned laymen in the city and many scholars from the convents. And what a debater he was! Not one of his colleagues in the Chapter could follow his *primos* and *secundos*, his *ergos* and *distinguos*. He took hold of his opponent’s argument and, in a trice, would hew it into pieces with that cutting, scholastic art of which he was a past-master. If, however, when he had reached his peroration, his adversary did not admit defeat, he would immediately resort to vicious abuse; he would tighten his lips furiously, his eyes would start out of his head with rage, and it was well known that the hands which were wont to scatter benedictions from the altar had taken many a cleric by the scruff of the neck.

Granted that his knowledge of philosophy was neither profound nor exact, and that his spirit never put forth the wings which shatter the cobwebs of routine, his theological attainments were sound and solid as granite. Who had first propounded the doctrines which he taught? Aristotle, the Fathers, St. Thomas. To imagine that any modern could be capable of improving upon the work of these sublime masters were sheer lunacy.

What was the philosophical creed upon which Spain had based her envied greatness? Upon that creed and no other—Ergo! . . . But he knew only too well what lay beneath the new doctrines, and as for those in Spain who opposed the dogmas of the Schoolmen, those who would deny the authoritative teachings of the ancient masters concerning the intelligible species, the phantasms of representation, and even those concerning the immortality of the soul, they were nothing better than allies of the foreigner or instruments of Satan.

Spain, as he envisaged her, was a prey to the espionage of innumerable enemies. Since she could not be conquered in open and manly warfare, an attempt was now on foot to undermine that religious unity which rendered her invulnerable, introducing into her bosom disputes, sectarianism, disorder. To wound her faith was to enfeeble her. Heresy was more formidable than all the armies of the world. Heresy was the realgar which, once swallowed, sapped the most virile energies, and, according to him, the poison had already been partially absorbed. Valladolid was a nest of Lutherans, Salamanca a seminary of heretics. The pupils of Valdés and Ramus, the followers of Erasmus and Luther, were, in truth, numerous enough. His old college friend, Francisco Sánchez, *El Brocense*, had hurled a vile insult at St. Thomas when the saint's sublime authority had been invoked in a dispute. The Cardinal Archbishop of Toledo, Bartholomew Carranza, was “lutheranising” in his “Christian Catechism.” The supreme moment had then arrived, the moment in which a battle is lost by a lapse of the will. It was not the time to expound theses, but rather to extirpate the plague, to cauterise those festering wounds for ever in the purifying flame. An end to complacency and temporising! To the stake with all rottenness!—and, Amen! What would become of Spain were she ever torn asunder, like the nations of the North, by a religious war? Her enemies would never allow so

excellent an opportunity for mischief to escape them. The Frenchman would join hands with the Turk, Flanders would come to terms with Albion; all together they would hurl themselves upon Spain, stabbing her treacherously in the back by means of a general rising of the *moriscos* of Aragón and Andalusia, who were only awaiting foreign encouragement. The Canon thought that the Holy Office dragged out its trials interminably. Not an instant must be lost. One had to bear in mind that the responsibility of Spain in the eyes of the Lord was far greater than that of any other nation in the world, for was she not singled out in every way as the land of the chosen, the modern Israel? The All-Highest manifested His choice not only in the victories which He granted her, but also in the plagues and disasters with which He chastised her delinquencies. The starvation and bankruptcy which now afflicted her, together with the defeat of the Invincible Armada, what were these but a scourging which she had merited by her tolerance of *moriscos* and heretics? Rome was God's throne on earth; Spain was His sword, His strong right arm, His host of archangels. Rome was the city of Peter, of the Pontiff, of the martyrs; Spain, the host of St. James the Apostle, whose ghostly image, mounted upon horseback and breathing vengeance, spread terror among the ranks of the infidels. But on the day when Spain should turn aside her face from the Lord, the enemy would enter, wading knee-deep in the blood of her women and children, like the soldiers of Titus in Jerusalem.

In spite of these harsh views, Vargas Orozco was a profoundly humane man. He lived, like a true Spanish *hidalgo*, a profound life of the soul. He gave away in alms all that was not absolutely necessary to maintain his modest existence, and took a tender-hearted interest in the most trivial cares of his fellow-men. When confronted, as he so frequently was during his ministry, with domestic troubles, he would weep

with the relatives and utter words of compassion which engraved themselves upon all memories like a tender and learned epitaph. But when he was dealing with heinous, collective sins, when the Holy Commandments or the dogmas of the Church were called in question, his heart shut tightly, like a clenched fist. Saturated from his early youth in the spirit of the Old Testament, he himself brandished the thunderbolt of that terrible, harsh, inexorable justice which mutters like a growing storm behind the sacred lines that tell of a million human lives ground to powder by Jehovah in order to enforce the observation of some rite or teach a moral lesson. In the eyes of Vargas Orozco, men were like earthenware pots which derive all their value from their contents, and which, once fouled by decaying material, should be destroyed and replaced by new ones.

His zeal for the mortification of the flesh was intense, and his scrupulous morals were all the more laudable in that he was continually assailed by tenacious temptations, clothed magnificently and exhaling a rare, voluptuous Eastern perfume. These the Demon would take an especial delight in conjuring up from the very texts of the Scriptures themselves.

Night and day would the Tempter lay siege to his soul. Sometimes, when absorbed in study, the Canon fancied that he could distinguish a loathsome, scaly wing, now fanning the embers of the brazier, now scorching itself in the flame of the lamp, now overturning the hour glass on to his manuscript. But it was at night, especially, in bed, just before he went to sleep, that the Canon waged his fiercest battles. A succubus, terrible, silky-soft, beautiful, would creep under the bed-clothes next to him, causing his flesh to tremble in a diabolic ecstasy; a prolonged, hateful, yet delicious sensation which incessant prayers could not succeed in banishing. At times an invisible hand would draw back the curtains of some alcove, and there some bejewelled nudity would await him, alone, in the silence of the night. Its tresses

diffused a sweet perfume, and its entrancing features were those of one of his penitents.

What struggles, what combats, those! While the spirit shrieked with horror the flesh wallowed in a bath of voluptuousness. He would then throw himself upon the ground and, taking down the disciplines, would flog himself until he was covered from head to foot with blood, like a Christ at the column. Hardly, however, had he closed his eyes again in quest of sleep, when the Demon, varying his methods, would cause him to experience the uncontrollable vertigo of pride. Now he would place upon the Canon's head a mitre of inadequate dimensions, or a cardinal's hat which fitted only too well, now the triple tiara of the pontiff which, so it seemed, had been made especially for his head, unique, sublime. The roar of a vast multitude broke at his feet, and he seemed to be floating above the concourse, very high, very erect, upon a shining throne. . . .

Then, his will abolished in sleep, he would crawl on all-fours towards the scarlet lips of pagan priestesses who lay at full length beneath the cedars, trembling, like panthers, with desire. . . .

If when he reached the cathedral he was told that the Canon had not yet concluded his siesta, Ramiro would while away the time in pacing to and fro along the aisles. At that hour the church was nearly always silent and calm, as though under the influence of some spell. The rattling of a stool moved by the sacristan was sufficient to provoke prolonged and sonorous echoes. An earthy, secular shadow slumbered at the foot of the altars, among the pillars, upon the stones. How profoundly, imperiously mysterious, those dark places of the church, those solemn chapels, that gray and dusty presbytery, eternally shrouded in sepulchral gloom! There the years were insensibly piling themselves up one upon another, like the leaves of a folio.

Ramiro trod the stones with a profound reverence

and, as he deciphered the inscriptions upon them, his spirit was deeply moved by the thought of those tremendous abstractions—death and glory. Some of the sepulchres housed the bodies of individuals now completely forgotten, their only epitaph: “Don Cristobal and his wife,” “Alonso,” “Doña Bona.” . . . In bygone years, perhaps, those names had long been eloquent of fame and majesty; and now they were as the bones which lie scattered upon the floor of a charnel-house, to be trampled under every foot. His heart, however, would swell with pride as he deciphered the names of ecclesiastical dignitaries and knights of his own lineage: “Sepulchre of the most virtuous Señor Don Nuño Gonzalo del Águila, Archdeacon of Ávila.” . . . “Here lieth the noble Knight, Gonzalo del Águila.” . . . “Here lieth the most honourable Knight, Diego del Águila, God rest his soul in peace”; and, as he contemplated the symbolic eagle, carved like the image of some household god upon the stone blazonings, it seemed to him that a voice from the world beyond was urging him on to the quest of power and glory.

But sometimes, face to face with that dread spectacle of the final extinction of all human hopes and desires beneath a crumbling stone, his soul took wing as he recalled the words of his mother and the Franciscan monk concerning the vanity of ambition. He would then fancy that he was no more than a will-o’-the-wisp which had escaped from among these ancestral relics, destined to roam for a fleeting moment through the night of the world. One could do nothing better, if that were the case, than don the penitent’s cloak and set oneself to win eternal salvation within the compass of four bare walls.

Occasionally, when time permitted, he would mount to the summit of the towers. He liked to gaze out upon the city and the countryside from the windows of the belfry, and his eyes would rest upon a certain house, united to the walls on the north side. Once he discerned

a moving spot, a tiny little form which crossed the orchards, climbed the turret staircase, and looked out over the embrasure. It was she, assuredly. He had not cared to re-visit Don Alonso's house, and had sworn to forget Beatrice for ever. With what victorious defiance did he now ask himself: How could the soul of a believer pursue a speck of life such as that, a crumb of ephemeral sensuality, often poisonous, when God, from His heavenly throne, held out the prospect of an infinite and eternal joy?

Such thoughts were beginning to make a deep impression upon Ramiro's spirit, when the tutor himself first disturbed him by his frank discussion of the question of temptation. He explained the origin and nature of the Devil and the horrible transformation which that angelic form had undergone when it fell from heaven into hell. He defined bestiality: *omnem concubitum cum re non ejusdem speciei*, demoniality, or *copula cum Daemone*, which two things some theologians had confused, and, finally, he spoke at length of relations with incubi and succubi from which, *aliquoties nascuntur homines*.

"And it is thus," he affirmed, "that, according to many Doctors, Antichrist will be born, and so, according to Livy, did Romulus come into the world, and Plato, so St. Jerome tells us. Quintus Curtius informs us that Alexander the Great was born in this way; the English Merlin was engendered by an incubus upon a nun, the daughter of Charlemagne; and, finally, the accursed heretic who bore the name of Luther was of like origin."

One had to exercise much caution. "Temptation," he said, "throbs and palpitates everywhere. Everything can be used by the Devil as a weapon and a bait."

One day Ramiro had made him a present of a luscious pear, in a wicker basket, and the Canon began to munch it unpeeled. It was of the variety known as "calabash," on account of their double swelling. Suddenly, as he

buried his teeth into the juiciest part of the fruit, he gave a start of terror and threw it into the corridor, waving his arms and crying, "*Vade retro, vade retro!*!" The Enemy had just revealed to him in that fruit with its double protuberance the seductive beauty of a woman's breasts.

From that time forth the youth began to live in a state of continual and unwonted apprehension. He began to think that to be virtuous was more difficult than he had imagined, to feel in every part of his body an ant-like activity of the instincts which at times intoxicated him like the fumes which rise from a wine-cask.

One cold afternoon in February, after the conclusion of his lesson and after hearing his tutor read a learned commentary upon the Song of Songs, Ramiro came across Aldonza near the balustrade of the staircase. She invited him to go up with her into the tower. A moment later they were both climbing the steps. Suddenly the wife of the bell-ringer halted, holding the lantern close up into the boy's face. Ramiro halted also, and his trembling hand informed him that the modern Shunamite had freed the "two twin roes" of the Song.

Thus did he lose his virginity, there on those gloomy stairs, heavy with the perfume of burning wax and incense.

When he raised his eyes to implore forgiveness for his terrible sin, he found himself face to face with the bell-ringer who, five or six steps higher up, stood waiting unconcernedly, a lighted taper in his hand. How long had he been there? Ramiro looked him quietly in the face and began to descend in the darkness, groping for the walls and uttering not a word.

Once outside, his stride acquired a new arrogance. The breeze from the Street of Life and Death gently fanned the impure after-taste upon his lips.

X

At the age of seventeen, thanks to a precocious adolescence, Ramiro had the appearance of a man in full and virile maturity of years. His haughty brow and his broad shoulders exacted deferential treatment from all who spoke with him. He now began to generalise, to seek the hidden meaning which lay behind every phenomenon, imagining, with youthful arrogance, that he was capable of solving the supreme enigmas of existence.

Contrary to the prevailing fashion, he allowed his jet-black hair to grow to an inordinate length, and his skin, deadly pale, as though incessant meditation had drained the blood from his veins, had the mysterious sheen of moonlit marble.

He had hoped to find in the Canon an ardent advocate of humility, but the exhortations of his new tutor only served to fan the flame of his pupil's ambition. He would frequently intersperse his lessons with tales of doughty deeds performed by members of the illustrious house of Águila, whose founder was the *adalid* Sancho de Estrada, a native of Asturias; and he would also mention by name famous warriors, sons of that city which, small as it was, had been Spain's most important seminary of chivalry and honour. The citizens of Ávila had everywhere distinguished themselves by their genius for leadership and their ardour in battle. Sancho Dávila, nicknamed "the Thunderbolt of War," was the *beau ideal* of the Flemish people.

"Oh, if I could only have my youth again and enjoy a few years of the unfettered, gallant life of a soldier!" exclaimed the Canon.

He did not mean by this that he repented his adoption of the noble career for which his star had marked him out—a thousand times, no. He merely thought that, in

a buff doublet, a morion upon his head and a Toledan sword in his hand, choosing his own field of campaign, he might have done much more for the welfare of the Catholic faith than he had done by allowing the years to slip by, bound by the cords of calumny and foolishness to a wretched canon's chair. He confided frankly to Ramiro the meanness and baseness of that stifling existence in a sacristy, telling him of the malice and unspeakable cruelty with which his colleagues had united against him when there had been talk of his being offered a bishopric. "The disgusting wretches, with their clipped wings," he said, "they well know that as soon as the eagle spreads his wings, able to cleave the skies, he will soar, soar. . . ." His impatient longing for a mitre, his besetting sin, was now more powerful than his virtue.

Swayed by the respectful admiration which he professed for his tutor, to whom, from the very first, he had revealed his whole soul, Ramiro gave his closest consideration to the path which that priestly finger had pointed out to him. He no longer doubted that, by following in the footsteps of his ancestors, he could be as useful to God and Holy Church in the career of arms as in the cloister or the pulpit. So he now devoted himself to the deciphering of ancient family parchments and to reading the history of the great captains of Rome and Spain. Soon the glorious destiny which he imagined to be his became inextricably confused with the great episodes of ancient history. His mind unhinged by his reading, he fancied that he himself was the hero of the stories. He was, successively, Julius Caesar, the Cid, the Great Captain, Hernán Cortés, Don Juan de Austria, and, when he took up his *Caesar*, it was he who led the cohorts through Gaul; but on the Ides of March, he, more shrewd than the dictator, suspected the treason of Brutus and, concealing a sword beneath his toga, entered the Curia and slew the conspirators one by one. He overcame the Moors in innumerable battles, won for

Spain the Kingdom of Naples or the Empire of Moctezuma; and at length, standing erect upon the bridge of some impossible ship, he destroyed, once and for all, the entire Turkish fleet in a new and prodigious Lepanto, created by his imagination from the engravings he had seen.

The result was that he grew to believe himself chosen by God to maintain the tradition of the unforgettable glories of history. Everything mediocre, prolix, patient, he banished from his field of vision. Everything that was not hasty and heroic left him cold, for he felt within him a confidence, an absolute conviction, that he would gain at one stroke the highest honours and that, within a very short space of time, he would become one of the most illustrious champions of the Catholic faith the world had ever known.

One afternoon, seated upon a rock in the dell which divides the Convent of the Incarnation from the city walls, Ramiro allowed his thoughts to wander at their will. Thrilled by the incomparable beauty of his surroundings, he would fancy that he could hear shouts of battle and sighs of ecstasy. The hills gleamed joyfully, as though bathed in liquid gold. It had been raining until three o'clock in the afternoon, and the storm was passing over in an easterly direction, revealing clear patches of ethereal, nacreous sky. A ragged strip of cloud, gold and purple, hung above the city, still trembling under the shock of the tempest by which it had been rent. The rugged wall glowed with an illusive, yellowish light which seemed to emanate from the stones themselves.

Gossip at that time was mainly concerned with a possible revolt of all the *moriscos* in Spain, aided by the Turks. In certain palaces of the city frequent meetings were held for the discussion of opinions and the exchange of news. Every Wednesday and Sunday the mansion of Iñigo de la Hoz swarmed with ecclesiastics and noble-

men. His campaign in the Alpujarras and his avowed hatred of the pseudo-converts marked out Don Iñigo, from the first, as the most important personage in the assembly. Ramiro now wondered whether, as an outcome of all this, an opportunity might not present itself to win the fame and glory he had so long desired.

Two artisans passed by. The youth recognised them as stonemasons, by the white coating of dust upon their hands. They were discussing food and wages.

“As I saw that no one budged an inch, I planted myself, straight as a pine, in front of the master and told him that with the pay he gave us we couldn’t fill the family stewpan, and that with the bacon soup and the wretched crusts we had to eat, the fat was melting from our bones.”

“What did he say?”

“He replied: ‘You’d make sorry monks, you rascals. Know that your lot would make many a bishop die of envy.’”

“Did he say that?”

“His very words.”

“Patience, Martin.”

Ramiro angrily tossed his head.

A Franciscan monk rode by on a gray ass. A holy joy shone in his eyes. Beneath the folds of his cassock one caught a glimpse of his naked, hairy legs. He was cudgelling his mount with a branch of willow. The good friar did not care a fig how he looked. . . . How great, thought Ramiro, must be the power of this superior happiness which thus mocks at all the vanities of men. . . .

Then a woman passed by, old and lean, hook-nosed, bronzed, a strange, distant look in her eyes. Her dirty rags fluttered in the breeze like the leaves of a book which has been cast into the flames. She walked slowly, tapping the ground with her stick. For all the wretchedness of her appearance, both her arms were adorned with gilt bracelets, and a double necklace of imitation

turquoise beads hung down upon her breast. As she approached Ramiro, she gazed at him intently, resting both arms upon her staff. The boy took out a coin, intending to offer it to her. But the woman asked him:

“Art thou Moor or Castilian?”

“A Christian ever, by the grace of God,” Ramiro answered.

The woman refused the alms and, stretching out her hand:

“I come to undeceive you at last, infidels and idolaters,” she cried, in the ominous tones of a prophetess. “You will drive out Hagar and her son, for thus it is written, and with them fortune shall also depart from the land. No more shall there be anyone to water your plains or to drive your ploughs. No longer shall there be anyone to sow and reap, or to prepare for you sweet perfumes. Who shall turn the windlass now? O people of Islam, your hands are shackled—but suffering is good fortune. Know that Paradise awaits those who suffer and they shall be honoured in the seats of the mighty!”

Ramiro, unable to curb his eagerness, held out his palm so that she might tell his fortune.

“Thy *jofor*,¹ thy *jofor*,” stammered the Moorish woman. But no sooner had she taken that slender, vigorous hand into her own, than she suddenly let it fall again. Ramiro, instinctively turning his head, saw the Canon, who, upon his way back from the Convent of the Incarnation, had caught sight of the youth and was coming in his direction.—“*Chiromanciam habemus*,” the cleric shouted from afar. Ramiro smiled. The Canon then took out a silver coin and offered it to the woman. She took it tremblingly, and began to walk slowly away. A moment later master and pupil heard the chink of the coin as it rolled over the stones.

Then, as they made their way back to the city, in the direction of the Puerta del Adaja, the Canon delivered the following harangue:

¹ Fortune.

“Thou hast just seen, my son, an example of the love this race of Islam bears us. Behold a wretched old woman who would rather tramp the roads, howling like a hungry wolf, than accept our alms. They profess to be converted, and yet they are as much Moors as though they were in Africa. They go to Catechism as though they were being dragged there by the hair of their heads, and fear alone induces them to bring their children to our churches for baptism. So soon as they are safe at home, they scrape the crown of their infants’ heads with a shard or the blade of a knife, washing the place immediately afterwards with infinite care in order to remove the last trace of the Holy Chrism. Then they baptise them again according to their own rites, with Moorish names which they secretly bear until the day of their death. They never eat the flesh of any animal which has not been strangled by infidel hands, its head pointed towards the east, towards Mecca and the *alkibala*, as they call it. They drink no wine, neither do they eat pork, in order to distinguish themselves from us, and, behind closed doors, they keep their fasts and observe the diabolical rites of their sect. I have seen, in their houses in Andalusia, tiled or marble baths wherein men wallow, perfumed like harlots. Such is their lascivious and heathen custom. The boys make the streets of the neighbourhood resound with their savage cries, and they all delight in the tambourine, the flageolet, the timbrel, the salacious pleasures of the dance, and walks among fountains and exquisite gardens, which corrupt and enervate the soul.”

He paused a moment in order to clear his throat. Then, after spitting emphatically upon the ground, he continued:

“In public, it is true, they do reverence to the Holy Cross; but when no one is there to see them, before some hermitage or some calvary, they heap all manner of indignities upon it. I myself came across a terrible example of their wickedness in the neighbourhood of

Talavera. Several of these accursed dogs had gone to look for wood in a forest hard by. Upon his return, one of them found himself obliged to ease his belly, and, constructing a cross out of two little oak branches, he planted it upon his ordures and left it standing there. I was probably the first Christian who chanced to pass by, and when I saw my beloved Cross in that plight I ran to pick it up and, fixing it in the roots of an oak, I began to adore it. I still guard it jealously, as though it were made of the bones of a Roman martyr, on account of the outrage to which it has been subjected."

The sun had just sunk below the horizon. The western hills stood out stark and gray against the flaming sky. Master and pupil reached the north-west corner of the wall, skirting it in a southerly direction. Below, upon their right, among the gloomy crags, the waters of the Adaja glowed with the splendour of molten gold. The Angelus had just sounded from the churches, and the bells of the neighbouring hermitage of San Segundo still throbbed sleepily.

"What is one to do," the Canon went on, "with this enemy in our midst, an enemy whom we have so often pardoned? What is one to do with these treacherous slaves who greet us with a smile by day, while by night they watch over our slumbers, a curved dagger in their hands? Thy grandfather, Ramiro, has told me, and no one knows more of such matters than he, that these Moorish muleteers and carriers whom we meet on the roads, sleeping in the sunshine beside their earthen jars, carry upon their persons seditious messages from Aragón to Granada and Granada to Aragón, by way of Castile. It is now common knowledge that the conspiracy includes all the *moriscos* in the kingdom."

The light was waning rapidly, but the Canon went on with his peroration, growing more and more excited, as though he were rehearsing on that lonely road a solemn oration which he intended to pronounce before some assembly.

“Some say that with the expulsion of the *moriscos* will come the downfall of Spain. The avarice of our days, gentlemen, . . .” he now exclaimed.—“Ah! gone for ever are those great men of yore who preferred a grain of honour to all the swollen money-bags of Moors and Jews. In our days the nobles of Aragón are the most fervent advocates and supporters of these infidel dogs. Castile is full of Christians who revel in Moorish gold and follow the example of the heathen. They think that with the sons of Mahomet there will go also luxury and good living, and that their lands will be overgrown with noxious weeds. Here, in Ávila itself, in the city of the loyal, the *caballeros*, the saints, the majority of the Council is against the expulsion. . . . And how can we wonder at it,” he added, lowering his voice and speaking almost into the boy’s ear, “when the Inquisition, the Holy Inquisition, receives 50,000 *sueldos*¹ every year from the Aragonese *aljamas*? ”²

Addressing himself to a non-existent assembly, in which, no doubt, his imagination could discern signs of enthusiasm, he proceeded:

“You assert that the expulsion will reduce by almost one half the riches of the kingdom? So much the better, messieurs the gluttons. What state could be more worthy of and beneficial to a Christian nation than the state of poverty? Superfluous wealth brings in its train licence and avarice, just as stagnant water engenders reptiles and obscene toads; luxury triumphs, and souls lose their primitive austerity, like swords filed to the breadth of a pin and covered with velvet, that the ladies in the salons may not take fright when they see them. Livy tells us that an excess of prosperity was the cause of all the ills which befell Rome, and that it was on account of this prosperity that the Romans descended into the depths of shame. If we consult Juvenal,” he went on, “he tells us that there was no species of infamy to which the Romans did not stoop when once they had forsaken

¹ An old Spanish coin.

² An assembly of Moors or Jews.

poverty. Was, perchance, the people of Israel, the people of God, an opulent people? If we are to keep our good name, our Seneca informs us, we shall never be rich; if we live according to Nature, we shall never be rich —nor can we ever be poor. I can vouch that I have never seen anyone borrow from a usurer in order to purchase olives, bread, or cheese. I have always observed that one man will so borrow in order to buy horses; another to buy fine clothing; another to keep company with harlots. Let, therefore, the blessed age of gold, or age of acorns, as it is also called, return once more. Let the noise of chariot wheels cease. Away with these trains of lackeys, drunk with wine and arrogance, both stolen from their masters. Let the old, stern virtues be re-born in our souls. May the table be poor, and the devotion rich. Let lack of clothing allow the robust freshness of the winds a freer access to our bodies!"

Having concluded his sermon, he spat several times upon the ground.

They entered the city by the Puerta del Adaja. The narrow, winding streets were swathed in a grayish, tremulous mist. The lamps were being lit in some of the taverns and the pavement outside the open doors was suffused in a dull, orange glow. An old man, seated at a window, his forehead pressed against the bars, gazed up into the sky as he told his beads. In another window, unlighted, a young girl was saying her prayers. Her face took on the ashen hue of the twilight. Her eyes gleamed strangely. As though that silence had impelled him to open the Shiloh of his conscience, the Canon, who had thought his sermon ended, burst out once again, although in a less minatory and more gentle tone:

"The spirit of compassion, my son, should only move us in the minor details of our private life, as the law of the Gospels ordains. Our own instincts teach us a great lesson when they prompt us to rescue a fly which is

drowning in a glass of water, and yet, at another time, to take up a napkin, twist it into a knot, and kill the creatures by the hundred upon the table or the wall. Give alms to the beggar, even though he carry the Koran in his hands; take pity upon the widow and the orphan, even though they belong to the accursed tribe of Mahomet; offer a glass of water to the thirsty Mussulman who passes by, or beg a sip from the jar of the infidel, as did Jesus from the woman of Samaria. Against this I say nothing, for it is all taught in the Gospel itself, the individual law, our daily bread. But when the solemn hour of justice strikes, let us know how to fulfil the purposes of the Lord without prevarication. For there is another law, my son," he added, lifting his hand and raising his voice like some prophet of old, "another and more ancient law, the law of the peoples. There is another Testament in which God Himself, with His own voice, sentences the impious, saying unto Moses: 'Thou shalt smite them and utterly destroy them, thou shalt make no covenant with them'—adding, 'nor show mercy unto them—*"nec misereberis eorum."*' And by the mouth of His prophet Samuel He bade Saul destroy the Amalekites, sparing neither men, women, nor children taking suck, so that no trace should remain of them or their possessions. We also, as an act of expiation, must tear up from our soil this poisonous weed. Let us not forget that we, in modern times, are the people of God, as was Israel in the days of old. It should not astonish us that semi-barbarous nations like England, Germany, Bohemia, or Hungary, are contaminated. But how can we, we in whom God has put His trust, permit the idolatrous and blasphemous servant to live within the confines of our own land? Whether by perpetual exile or by total extermination and, should it be necessary, a Sicilian Vespers (in which we should only anticipate what they will eventually do to us), Heaven clearly ordains that we must consummate the task of purification. Fear of shedding blood, my son,

is one of man's basest instincts. Jehovah is aghast at vice, impiety, a solitary sin, but not at blood poured out justly. No good harvest can be obtained without blood, and the Lord, in His own good time, causes it to flow—as merciful then as when He sends down the rain from the clouds on to the furrows. Human lives, like grains of incense, derive their value from the fruits of their sacrifice. And now, if you would hear of gentler remedies, we shall also find them in the Scriptures."

After a moment's meditation he went on:

"‘Give them, O Lord: what wilt Thou give? Give them a miscarrying womb and dry breasts.’ Let us repeat this inspired sentence. It commands us to wreak upon the false converts the same vengeance which fell upon the people of Ephraim. His Holiness will permit it—that goes without saying—and there are surgeons who know how such a punishment may be inflicted. Thus shall they die out gradually, and without pain.”

He uttered these words in a calm, doctrinal tone, without a trace of anger. The boy listened, drinking in his master's words like a precious draught of wisdom. Meanwhile they had reached the threshold of the cathedral, and the huge mass of the temple, prayerful, warlike, was silhouetted against the serene azure of the evening sky. The last glow of sunset was fading from the towers.

The air was laden with an acrid odour of cooking. The Canon bade Ramiro good-bye and, as he was about to enter the church, a lackey stopped him in order to tell him that the Señor de San Vicente was asking for him. The house was not more than a few paces distant, in the quarter of St. Giles.

XI

PHILIP DE SAN VICENTE, member of the Council of Orders, Commissary of the Holy Inquisition, and ex-groom-in-waiting to the king, gave the Canon a cordial reception, taking both the cleric's hands in his own.

Then, after bolting the doors, he suddenly asked him, in a mysterious tone: "Could you, Sir Canon, recommend some reliable man who could undertake a mission in the service of His Majesty and the nation? Mark that he must be of the noblest lineage, devout, courageous, tactful, and as young as possible, so that his journeyings to and fro may be attributed, for example, to some affair of the heart."

The Canon began to stroke his lower lip, as though he were trying to drag forth a suitable name. Soon, after a brief silence, his eyes sparkled, and he answered enthusiastically:

"Yes, I know him—the very man for you."

"I know you, and am therefore certain, without further parley, that you have chosen well," the hidalgo replied, subsiding into his chair, and stretching out his brown-velvet-stockingled legs to the brazier.

Then, with drowsy loquacity, interrupted only by the noisy efforts which he made, from time to time, to clear his throat, he went on to tell the Canon that, according to recently ascertained facts, the *moriscos* were preparing for a general rising throughout the kingdom, and that it was imperative that they should be caught red-handed.

"We suspect," he added, "that there exists in this very city a secret meeting-place of the conspirators, where they are continually receiving seditious messages from Aragón and Valencia. But, Sir Canon, we must have absolute proof of all this, for the majority in the town council pleads on their behalf and Spain is full of titled people who, unwilling to see their fields deserted, lend them, surreptitiously, a helping hand."

He then went on to say that the Junta in Madrid had just entrusted him, regardless of his age and infirmity, with that delicate and difficult mission, and that he wished to share it with an ecclesiastic whose special qualifications would enable him to judge more accurately of the suitability or otherwise of any citizen. His voice growing lower and hoarser with every word he uttered, he went on to explain the instructions which the Canon

must transmit to his agent. His own voice seemed to affect him like a narcotic. It was now impossible to understand him. His words flickered, and then went out altogether. At length, clearing his throat and spitting for the last time, he allowed his head to droop on to his shoulder and fell asleep.

The Canon did not know what to do. The bolts were drawn, and the wicks of the lamp, which threatened to go out altogether, were already crackling. There was not a single book upon the table, and he had forgotten his breviary. He then reflected that life has no predicament which can resist a sound philosophy and, oblivious of the hour and of the circumstances, he gave himself up to contemplating that man of dull wits who had, nevertheless, attained the highest honours and could now count himself among the most influential personages in the commune, one for whom the king had an especial regard. He was under the middle height, his back slightly crooked, his beard reddish. His face wore a sad, comical, buffoon-like expression. His lower lip protruded with tremulous lubricity.

The San Vicente family was one of the oldest in the city, although not one of the most noble and illustrious. It sprang, nevertheless, from a Maria de la Cerdá, and its genealogical tree was adorned by Juan Mercado, first King of Milan, Thomas de San Vicente, nicknamed "the Bold," and, above all, Ruy López de Ávalos, Constable of Castile. The *caballeros* of his line were entitled, by an ancient privilege, to be buried in the transept of Santa María del Castillo, at Madrigal, a church honoured by a chaplaincy from the constable. In Ávila, also, they had the right to be interred in the parish of St. Thomas, where their family chapel is situated, in St. Thomas the Royal, in the very interior of the temple, and in the tombs of San Vicente, a church in which the family arms were painted upon the seats in the Capilla Mayor, in accordance with a time-honoured custom.

As he now gazed at Don Philip's red beard, purple in the light of the lamp, the Canon thought of the ancient races who had come to Iberia from across the stormy northern seas, and in his turn he closed his eyes, dreaming distasteful dreams of blond savages and powerful, naked women with orange-coloured hair, already glowing with the light of hell.

Suddenly the outer door was rattled noisily, and a despairing voice in the corridor began to scream, "Help! help! I am dying!"

The Canon sprang from his seat, unbolted the door and opened it. It was a lackey. The wretched man, his face the colour of chalk, his hands still clutching a saddle upholstered in blue velvet, threw himself at his master's feet.

"What is the matter?" asked the hidalgo, only half awake.

"It is Don Pedro, Don Pedro who pursues me in order to cut my throat. He's here—look at him!" added the lackey, pointing towards the corridor and trembling from head to foot, like one possessed.

No sooner had the words left his mouth, when the younger son of the house entered the room, mad with rage, his mouth twisted into a murderous grimace. Finding himself face to face with the priest, he raised his right hand, and his broad, unsheathed sword flashed in the lamplight.

The Señor de San Vicente nodded his head with a bitter, sorrowful smile, while the boy approached the lackey and pricked his cheek with the point of the sword.

"Hold, in the name of Christ, hold!" cried the Canon, seizing the youth by the arm. The boy restrained himself with an effort, replacing the sword in its sheath, while the servant gazed aghast at his bloodstained fingers.

"It is not enough that I am disinherited, the plague of your house, the prodigal, but now my brother's very servants are allowed to mock me," he roared, glancing covertly at his father as he strode about the room.

"The fault is yours, sire, for you have put me upon a level with the servants. Wealth, honour, caresses—all, all are for Gonzalo. Now you must also cover him with jewels, as though he were the miraculous image of some saint, and give him of the best you have; the best horse, the finest sword, spending upon his adornment more than you can rightly afford. 'Sdeath! Not long ago you gave him the ruby medallion, then your golden dagger and an embroidered baldric. And to me nothing, nothing! You let me roam the city poor and ragged as a peasant. For one brother feasting; for the other bones and stew. 'Od's blood! did not the same womb bear us both?"

Then, in mincing tones, he went on mockingly:

"'Get thee to America or Flanders, my son, or, rather, enter the Church, and we will give thee our chaplaincy of Santa María del Castillo, in Madrigal.' That is what you tell me the whole year round. But it is not enough. You well know that Beatrice has loved me since I was a child—and yet you would have me leave her to my brother. It is for that you allow this wretched flannel to rot upon my flesh, so that I cannot show myself before any woman. Look at this miserable sword—it might belong to some paltry student. But rude and gross as it is, it shall learn how to avenge a wrong. 'Od's death! A year ago, sire, I begged of you some harness for my horse—and you would not grant me even that!" he shouted, tapping his teeth with his finger-nails. "And now that this saddle has come, ignoring my request you send it to him—and he has more than he requires already. Yet this swine," he exclaimed, pointing to the lackey, "shows it to me from afar in order to taunt me with it. I ask to look at it, and he rushes away, screaming."

Don Philip continued to shake his head, without raising his eyes.

"But, ah! sire," the youth went on, "the dessert will not be as toothsome as you imagine. No, no," he voc-

ferated, stamping violently upon the floor and uttering tragic groans, like one demented. One of his stockings slipped down, revealing the white, downy skin of his leg.

This time the hidalgo ventured to reply : "Calm yourself, my son; it is the hard law of nobility. You are the younger son. As for Beatrice, you yourself know that she has loved Gonzalo from her childhood."

The boy almost crouched at his father's feet, and, face to face, his eyes flashing, he again shouted in a stern, terrible voice, "No! No!"

At this moment the elder son entered. His chain, his sword, the jewel in his cap, sparkled in the twilight. As he moved you could hear the jingling of metal and the rustling of silk. After saluting the Canon:

"I am sure," he said proudly, and in chiding tones, to his brother, "that you are trying to pick a quarrel with my father."

"It is true," replied the hidalgo. "He is angry because I wished to send you this caparison here, with which the *alcalde* of Toledo has just presented me."

The lackey approached the young man in order to offer him the saddle.

The family arms were embroidered in multi-coloured silks upon either side of the dark blue velvet, and tiny pearls glistened like dewdrops upon the gold and silver arabesques.

Before that bejewelled harness the elder son became for a moment oblivious of the people who surrounded him, and in his mind's eye saw the saddle upon the back of his favourite horse Valenzuela. The vision of Beatrice behind the lattices flashed across his mind. Then, as though awakening from a dream: "Leave him, father, to poison himself with his own venom," he exclaimed. "If he knows not how to bear his own state in life, the worse, I say, for him. . . ." These words, uttered with haughty disdain, were like the lash of a whip over the ears of a tiger. The younger son, raising his hands, clenched in fratricidal rage, poured forth a torrent of

insults and incomprehensible threats, while his brother, pale and motionless, gazed at him with a convulsive smile, his hand upon his dagger.

Suddenly, alarmed by the tempest of voices, Doña Urraca, the hidalgo's wife, appeared in the doorway like an apparition. All turned their faces towards her. An icy silence fell upon the room. She was a grave, beautiful woman and her pale, slightly sallow complexion together with her proud bearing gave her the appearance of a flower of steel.

"What must your grace think of such an uproar?" she cried, addressing the Canon. Then, turning towards her husband: "If it had not been for your cowardice this would not have happened. Soon our sons will be at one another's throats before your very eyes."

The hidalgo allowed his head to droop lower and lower, and nervously stroked the arms of the chair with his hands.

Doña Urraca went on: "What base blood have you in your veins, sire, which will not permit you to preserve the honour of your house?"

Stung by this insult, the hidalgo straightened himself brusquely in his chair.

"I have already told you a thousand times, señora," he replied, raising his head and revealing his watery eyes, "that my blood is as pure and noble as that of the best in Spain. Sir Canon, who is present here, and who is well acquainted with my lineage, can bear witness to that. Is it, perchance," he added, rising to his feet, "is it perchance a thing of nought—a lineage which goes back to Sancho de San Vicente and Doña Maria de la Cerda, and which can boast of two Constables of Castile?"

His wife replied to this sally with a smile, barely raising one corner of her mouth. Then, after taking leave of the Canon, she raised her fine hand, adorned with lace ruffles, and, looking the youths straight in the eyes, said to them imperiously: "You will follow me."

Sure of being obeyed, she turned on her heel, and left the room. The two brothers followed, and for several seconds the clanking of spurs could be heard along the corridors.

When the Canon, eager to retire, asked Don Philip whether he might attend to the matter of the mission, the unfortunate gentleman was a long time in hearing the question. At length he nodded his head in affirmation, and told the Canon that he placed the conduct of that delicate affair entirely in his hands.

When he again found himself alone, Don Philip took from his pocket an antique rosary and, kissing the cross repeatedly, fell to sobbing like a woman.

XII

OWL-LIKE, the Canon spent the night gazing, wide-eyed, into the darkness. Sleep was impossible, and every nerve in his body itched with an unwonted agony. It was not the sting he knew so well—the incessant pricking of the wasps of desire. It was a burning in the blood, a fever of the will, a passionate impatience.

Before cock-crow, he flung back the sheets and, in less time than you could say "Amen," with ecclesiastical celerity, he found himself dressed. He then took up his Book of Hours and, as was his custom, went down to the church, to mount immediately to the second storey of the turreted Cimborio, which forms at once the apse of the cathedral and the broadest, strongest tower of the fortress-wall.

April was drawing to its close. The breath of dawn, like some refreshing spray, soothed every fibre of his being, weary with lack of sleep. The dense mist took on a vague, opalescent tint, as though the dawn were kindling its first torch in the eastern sky. Not a sound could be heard. Ávila was yet asleep. The bell of a

neighbouring convent tolled out timidly, softly, its insistent summons.

The Canon inhaled with delight the odour of the moist stones and invisible blades of grass which he trod underfoot as he walked.

Several rectangular shapes loomed up here and there, as though suspended in the air. The roofs stood out confusedly as milk-white patches of varying intensity. The Canon felt within him the burgeoning of a new and all-pervading confidence. He sensed around him a benevolence which one could breathe, a joyful and virginal half-light comparable to that which the Eucharist diffuses in the soul.

The towers and buttresses of the temple rose like a majestic vision from the gauzy foam of the dawn; and one by one the turrets of the rampart retired, solemn, spectral, until, at length, they became completely invisible. The Canon felt, as never before, the power which turrets possess of invoking the spirits of bygone days. *Galaor, Esplandián, Amadís, Lancelot*—all filed by. It was the hour at which the knights-errant were wont to sally forth from their castles, their armour gleaming in the misty light. . . .

A cock crew.

The Canon brushed aside the memory of those importunate legends which had stolen away so many hours that might have been devoted to study and to prayer, and as it proved no easy matter to read even the *Office*, he ceased walking and rested his elbow upon the stone wall.

Close by him, showing no signs of fear, the fat sparrows, perched upon the ramparts, were drying their feathers or exchanging little pecks of love. Already, a few paces away, the scarlet poppies and blue borage could be seen, spreading wide their petals among the countless plants which grew more vigorously upon the flat surface of the wall than in the fields. The fog began to disperse—growing more opalescent, more diaphanous. A long bar

of purple light glowed in the eastern sky like a scimitar of burnished copper. In the city the streets can now be seen, like deep furrows. The pointed roofing of the archbishop's palace stands out blackly around the court. The weather-beaten stones of the cathedral, the enormous turrets rounded by the centuries, are tipped with the ruddy splendour of the dawn. Suddenly the Canon perceives in the distance, away over the hills, the dark shadows of the peasants on their way to the Mercado Grande, near San Pedro. A loud murmur breaks the silence, cries from the *patios*, blows of hammers upon anvils, creaking of bolts, indistinct voices. The sun has just appeared over the edge of a hill, a glowing ember fanned into flame, a fiery carbuncle.

The Canon recalls the flaming horns of Moses; and soon the verses of Scripture which enshrine the elemental law and the duty of inflicting punishment upon the worshippers of the Golden Calf are jingling in his brain

“Behold,” he exclaimed, “the Lord now employs this most eloquent sign in order to urge me on to wreak vengeance upon the avaricious and blasphemous people of Mahomet!”

He is trembling with a sacred emotion. He is about to fulfil a sacred duty, and who knows whether his recommendation of Ramiro for the urgent mission may not lead the youth directly to the greatest honours? For some time past the Canon had placed all his hopes in that youth of lofty lineage, whom he was now training in order that he might bear him afterwards, like a falcon, upon his wrist. The Señor de San Vicente had said that he would communicate the result of the investigations to the Junta of Madrid. Might he not obtain the mitre and the staff as a result of this affair?

The twelve mid-day peals had not yet been tolled when Vargas Orozco ordered his pupil to be summoned. They seated themselves upon a bench in the hall of the Chapter. Ramiro listened to his master with his

usual submission. The orders were spirited and peremptory. He must get to know every corner of the Santiago quarter, introducing himself into the *patios*, the inns, the taverns, until he should at length overhear some treacherous conversation. The trail must be picked up at once, and even at the risk of his life he must unexpectedly surprise some flagrant conspiracy. He concluded with these words: "Some think that in order to avoid suspicion it will be wise for you to represent yourself as engaged in some amorous escapade. Remember that whatever you may do, you do it for a sacred purpose."

They had left the Chapter hall, and were now walking along the nave of the church. The Canon went on: "Learn, my son, from these solemn sepulchres where those heroes of old now rest, those heroes who daily risked their lives in order to serve God and add lustre to the glory of their lineage. See them succeeding one another throughout the ages, united like vertebrae, transmitting one to another that marrow of honour which is now housed in your bones."

Ramiro shuddered. It was the habitual effect of that word which the Canon had just uttered. Honour! Vague divinity of vague behests—the mere name of which could quicken the beating of his heart and stain his cheek with a proud blush. His rosary, wound round the hilt of his sword, rattled against the steel.

"This mission which you are now about to undertake," added the Canon, "will be in the service of the Holy Church of Christ. If you wish to go far, very far, allow Her to be your guide in all things, without scrutinising too closely either the attitude or the path which Her wise purposes may prompt you to take."

Passing through a door in the transept, they entered the cloisters. The burning rays of the sun streamed down upon the stone tiles of the *patio*, and the bizarre, plateresque cresting of pink granite stood out against the glowing indigo of the sky. Diaphanous insects

rose from the grassy garden and fluttered about in the light.

Beneath the vaulting, next to the Chapel of the Caves, two masons, in breaking through a portion of the wall, had just laid bare a sepulchre. Ramiro and the Canon approached. It bore no inscription of any kind; apart from a rude bas-relief which represented Our Lady and Her Child. It was as though Death exacted no further tribute. A fresh blow from the pick widened the breach, and, like a puff of smoke, a grayish cloud of dust rose into the air. One of the workmen put his hand into the hole and drew out a small piece of metal. It was a spur, a long, pointed Moorish spur, crumbling with rust and coated with verdigris. The Canon took it reverently in his hand, and raising it so that the purple ray of sunlight which came in through the window might fall upon it, began to speak as though in a delirium: "How many times the sight of Moorish cloaks on the horizon will have caused it to sink, heroic and bloody, into the courser's flank! Behold, Ramiro, the emblem of chivalry, the blazon of the riding-boot, the timbrel of honour! The mere sound of its clanking upon the tiles adds fresh lustre to the dignity of an *hidalgo*."

Then, revealing his strong, white teeth in a sudden smile, he said with a solemn, almost sorrowful gesture: "Alas that no learned and elegant epitaph informs us concerning the house and the prowess of the ancient *caballero* whose ashes lie buried here!"

At length, returning the spur so that it might be replaced in the tomb, he concluded: "Return again to rest beside the ashes of your owner, O relic of ancient Christian honour, while we pray for the unknown soul whom you ennable even in death!"

He took off his hat and, bowing his head, mumbled a prayer. Ramiro followed suit.

XIII

THE inception of the difficult enterprise brought with it a consolidation of his scattered energies. Until now Ramiro had wandered vaguely through the gigantic, chimerical world which dawning ambition creates for itself. Hour after hour would fly by as he dreamed of deeds inconceivably heroic, afire with the lust for sovereignties and honours, which he would envisage as piling themselves up one upon another throughout the future, like jars filled with treasure in some subterranean cavern.

This fever of the mind was aggravated by his isolation. He had not a single companion of his own age. For a long time, in spite of his mother's disapproval, he had endeavoured to cultivate the society of several youths in the city. He had made the acquaintance of a certain Nuñez Vela, Valdivieso, the brothers Rengifo, Diego Dávila, Nuño Zimbrón. He would dream of heroic friendships; all frankness and ardour, he offered unstintingly the cup of his loyalty, filled to overflowing. He was not long, however, in remarking that a secret animosity sealed all lips in his presence, and that his own warm hand pressed only limp and icy fingers. On the contrary, a mutual cordiality obtained among the others, and that common hostility which they manifested towards him, that tacit conspiracy, seemed to bind them more closely together.

Why? Why? he would unceasingly ask himself with a manly forbearance and without allowing his mind to dwell upon the idea of revenge—why has it not been mine to win that cordiality with which the veriest imbecile and, sometimes, even a traitor and a felon, is greeted at every step?

He was unaware as yet of the peril lurking within

that proud, strong spirit which inspired every phrase he uttered.

At length, when walking one evening along the Rua with Miguel Rengifo, his one remaining friend, he said, in a moment of affectionate confidence:

“If fortune should favour me, Miguel, and if after some signal deed of bravery they make me governor of a fortress, I shall send for you and make you my first captain.”

Rengifo, nicknamed “the Dwarf” on account of his small stature, turned on his heel and replied angrily: “And why should *I* not be the one whom fortune favours; why should *I* not send for *you* and make *you* my captain?”

He never saw that friend again, and, drawing about him the cloak of his pride, Ramiro turned his back upon the world and accepted solitude.

Day by day, with ever increasing vigilance, Ramiro frequented the Santiago quarter. From the earliest years of his youth he had known no fear of danger. He now regarded his own life, as well as that of others, with a fatalistic indifference. Pride in his mission intensified his daring. He was an agent of His Majesty, the guardian of a grave state secret. Who could say that the Court had not chosen him deliberately, while affecting a merely casual designation? In any case, even though it were not so, his name would soon reach the ears of the monarch. Sometimes, as he paced the winding alleys of the Moorish quarter, he would fancy that he had discovered all the details of the conspiracy, and he seemed to see before him the superhuman figure of Philip II, who gravely approached him in order to place around his neck the insignia of some order.

He left the house early in the morning, without either mule or lackey, dressing very simply so that he might not attract attention. He carried, however, the fine Toledan sword, which had been given to him by his great-uncle, Don Rodrigo del Águila, together with a

serviceable dagger, wearing beneath his jerkin the usual buff doublet.

He nearly always left the city by the Gate of Antonio Vela and, affecting the manner of an idle vagabond, descended, by some short cut, the southern slope. In the small suburb of Santiago there was more noise and animation than in the city itself. The fecundity of the race throbbed and palpitated in the sunlit air. The whitewashed doorways vomited forth vast masses of half-naked children on to the dirty pavements. Business was carried on at the top of the voice. A dispute arose at every moment. The sleepy murmur of loom and windlass could be heard incessantly, recalling the muttering of prayers in a crowded mosque.

Nearly all the men were dressed in the Spanish fashion. Some were attired in linen breeches, such as are worn by sailors. The women were clad in skirts of a rustic hue, with short petticoats. It was pleasant to see the lithe figure of a young girl walking along the streets, barefoot, but wearing a yellow rose or crimson carnation jauntily fastened in her sleek tresses. She swayed from the hips as she walked, and her smile was more precious than all the necklaces in the world. The men stopped to watch her pass, some whispering Moorish words into her ear. Others lifted their heads, sniffing the air like lustful camels.

Without enquiring the price, and throwing upon the counter an excessive sum, Ramiro would often buy a perfumed camisole or a pair of children's shoes, which he would give to the Moorish mothers. He had set out upon his wanderings with hatred in his soul—but, gradually, his very charity, feigned as it was, his protective gestures, and the benevolence which shone upon every countenance, cooled his blood and caused him to discover at every step a fresh charm in the gracious, sensuous life of the Moslems.

The taverns were the best places in which to carry on the work of espionage. The most popular of these was

situated opposite to the Church of Santiago. It was owned by a *morisco* called "the Nazarene," perhaps because of his resemblance to the black and bearded Christs of the crucifixes which one sees in hermitages. At ten in the morning, or at six in the evening, all kinds of people crowded into this eating-house: muleteers who left their animals and their earthen jars in the *patio*; workmen from the valley who, as they came in, wiped the sweat from their foreheads with their sleeves; cobblers, dealers in earthenware, tinkers and weavers of the quarter. Ramiro also would sit cross-legged upon the mats and, ordering some dainty, begin to scrutinise the company from beneath his broad-brimmed hat. One morning he went into the courtyard at the rear of the inn and watched a heifer being slaughtered, its head turned towards the east. Two old men bowed their heads, mumbling a prayer, and when they noticed that Ramiro did not do likewise they stared at him in astonishment. Ramiro retraced his steps, proud of the secret he had discovered; but he was not long in remarking that the constables who frequented the tavern often witnessed such diabolic rites—a present from "the Nazarene" of a crisp, golden pancake, fresh from the frying-pan, sufficing to buy their silence.

Before long Ramiro began to excite attention. They spoke to him in Arabic—and he was unable to reply. Several journeymen from the common recognised him, and he became thenceforth the recipient of increasingly hostile glances.

One evening, on his way home, while passing a clump of trees behind the Church of Santa Cruz, he suddenly heard a loud detonation, and, at the same time, a sharp whistling sound just above his head. He looked round. Upon his left, a round, white cloudlet was floating upon the air. It was a shot from an arquebuse. Drawing his sword, he ran to the spot from which he imagined it had been fired. He looked round him in all directions. No one was to be seen. As he went on his way he happened

to remove his hat. On either side of the crown he saw two round holes.

He did not, however, on that account, cease to frequent the tavern. The *moriscos* now cast curious glances at him, muttering and mumbling among themselves. On one occasion they invited him to drink with them, offering him a glass filled to the brim. The idea of magic philtres and poison crossed his mind. He was, however, about to accept, when a venerable personage, dressed like a *caballero* and wearing in his belt a curved dagger inlaid with jewels, rose suddenly from his seat in the darkest corner of the room and, when he had reached Ramiro, took him by the arm, saying: "Drink from this cup, less unworthy of an *hidalgo*." And he offered him, brimful, his beaker of dark steel, richly embossed with red gold. Ramiro drank resolutely, putting his trust in fate.

The man with the dagger gazed at the others with a strange expression in his eyes.

His face was not new to Ramiro. He remembered having seen it countless times in the course of his life, and he had sometimes returned home puzzled as to the identity of the individual whom he had so frequently encountered by the city gates. Was it not the same mysterious person who had killed the wild boar in that hunt? Ramiro, as he left the cake shop, mentally compared the man's face with that of the vague, almost forgotten figure which his memory called up before him, and as he did so the whole distant scene re-enacted itself in his mind.

It was about ten years ago. Don Alonso Blázquez had invited many *caballeros* to a hunting party. Ramiro and his mother were among the guests. It was one day in October, and he was riding, together with other little boys, in the company of the ladies. He seemed to see them now in their habits of green or russet velvet, galloping along on their nags through the luminous fields, in the train of the *hidalgos*. 2

A fierce boar, on his way back from a meal, contrived to cross the line of huntsmen. Then, breaking through a dense, thorny hedge, he entered a plantation of green oaks, making in the direction of the mountains.

Once freed from the leash, the dogs overtook the brute and succeeded in intercepting it a short distance away, while the beaters vainly endeavoured to force a passage through the hedge. In the meantime the boar, his back against a tree, rolled a disembowelled dog on to the ground with each thrust of his tusks. The struggle grew fiercer and fiercer. The mastiffs seized the beast by the ears, the pointers caught him by the back legs, the greyhounds seized him wherever they could, and it was impossible to go to their aid. The ladies groaned as they saw the beautiful white and yellow greyhounds dying one by one. Suddenly a horseman appeared—no one could say whence he came—passed to the right of the party upon his magnificent charger and, with one prodigious leap, jumped over to the other side of the hedge. He dismounted at once and, brushing aside one of the dogs, caught the boar by the throat with one hand, while with the other he thrust his dagger deep into the brute's ribs. The animal collapsed upon the ground, and the horseman, remounting, and leaping once more over the hedge, doffed his cap to the ladies and rode off at top speed. His great yellow cloak streamed upon the wind, like a flag carried off by the enemy. All gazed after him in astonishment. Ramiro remembered that his mother, who had never before attended a hunt, swooned; and it now seemed to him that the mysterious huntsman was none other than the man who had just offered him in the tavern his beaker of steel embossed with red gold.

“Of what use is it to think of that?” he said to himself at last. “What matters it that these dogs are suspicious and are trying to find some way to make an end of me? A love affair! Without that pretext, I shall be unable to go on.”

A number of female figures, weavers, fruit-sellers, water-girls, passed before his mind's eye.

The sun had gone down. The streets were deserted. A rattling of shutters resounded near by, and before he had time to admire the exquisite whiteness of an arm, laden with bracelets, which appeared through a slit in the lattice, a flower, a scarlet carnation, struck him smartly in the face. Ramiro approached and peered through the opening. He could only make out the hollow darkness of a room. He could, however, hear occasionally the sound of clear, silvery laughter, like the rippling of spring water. After waiting for some time, in vain, he ascended in the direction of the city. The tower of the Alcázar stood out, dark and forbidding, against the sky of limpid green. Night had almost fallen.

XIV

THE following day Ramiro, in adventurous mood, descended, as was his wont, the slope of Santa María de Gracia and made his way to the busiest part of the Santiago quarter.

Under the blazing noonday sun of this June day, the Plaza del Rollo had the appearance of a Berber market. To the west, in a street sheltered by an awning, the motley merchandise was heaped up in the shade. An old man, a perfume seller, was sniffing his own flasks, feigning indescribable pleasure, in order to tempt the girls to a purchase. Ramiro passed by this spot and noticed somewhat further on an inquisitive group which swayed to and fro around the butchers' stalls.

"Some dispute among the slaughtermen—perhaps a murder," he said to himself.

Then he remembered that it was a Saturday, the day of the week upon which the Moorish butchers, in accordance with traditional custom, were compelled at their own expense to feed the hawks belonging to the

lords of the city. He had often witnessed the scene in his childhood. He approached the crowd. It was a large concourse of people, such as is wont to gather around street jugglers and dancers.

The *moriscos* strode to and fro, carrying the meat in wicker baskets or earthen pots, while the falconers waited, motionless, with the birds. To judge by the enormous number of hawks and falcons, the citizens of Ávila must have been passionately devoted to the royal sport.

There were falcons gentle, with long, fine claws, who gazed in haughty disdain at their perches and wished that they could always be carried upon the wrist; many olive falcons, with yellow spots like drops of sulphur, their legs laden with bells in order to moderate their transports; white eagles from Tlemcen, with sinister pupils; Asturian hawks, with feathery claws; gerkfalcons from Norway, white as sea-gulls; and a few of those birds which in Castile are known as "lettered," on account of their wings, which look as though they were covered with writing, like the pages of a book. There were also melancholy lanners from Galicia, sparrow-hawks from Majorca, tawny hawks from Barbary; and no lack of proud falcons from Pedroche, birds who deign to strut only upon a gaily coloured cloth. Goshawks there were in abundance: Norwegian, Sardinian, Slavonian, together with those which Don Alonso Blázquez Serrano had brought from Algéciras. Smaller than the others, they could, nevertheless, carry off two ducks at a time and seize a hare without any assistance from the greyhounds.

Here two falconers, in order to amuse the crowd, alternately removed and replaced the hood of an infuriated gerkfalcon. Here another, wearing the livery of the Dávila, loosened the strap by which a hawk was fastened to its perch and allowed the bird to soar into the air, causing it to descend immediately by waving the dummy quail used as a bait.

Ramiro gazed with admiration upon these bloody creatures, these silent and cruel birds, the scourge of their species, of which they were the only members worthy to perch upon a royal glove. They were the hidalgos among the countless host of winged creatures, the conquerors, the captains, the glory of the air. With ravenous beaks, fierce claws, and swift, impetuous wings they would hurl themselves upon any bird, however terrible, and appeared to take a delight in the ghastly wounds which they frequently received when aloft. It now occurred to him for the first time that in those great birds he could find an emblem of his own soul—those birds who, even when asleep upon their perches, pecked the air savagely as they dreamed of imaginary prey.

Suddenly he felt a touch upon his shoulder and, turning his head, found himself face to face with a figure whose appearance he had never forgotten. It was the old woman whom he had mentally dubbed "the sorceress."

"The carnation did you no hurt last night?" she asked, gazing at him with a honeyed smile. Then, lowering her voice mysteriously: "If you could but see her! She is the most beautiful woman in all Castile. She does nothing else all day but sing and anoint herself with perfume."

The youth recalled the incident of the flower, thrown to him by a woman's hand on the previous evening. The old woman went on: "She is a houri from the highest heaven. If you wish to speak with her, follow me without saying a word."

Ramiro followed her at a distance.

When he had arrived at the door of a house which stood somewhat apart from the rest, the woman beckoned him with a vague gesture. They entered a wretched *patio*, surrounded by pillars of blackish, worm-eaten wood. An ancient pomegranate tree spread its knotted branches over a water tank. The dazzling white-wash, the dense blue of the sky, the scarlet blossoms

of the mallows in the window, made an enchanting clash of colour.

They passed through several apartments filled, like the rooms of a Moorish inn, with beds and small mattresses. A few crucifixes upon the walls and a Virgin or two upon the *bargueños*¹ suggested, however, a Christian household. As they crossed another *patio*, they came upon a sedan chair, enclosed with leather curtains. The old woman then remarked that in order to reach the "beauty of the carnation" they would have to be carried in this vehicle to another house in the Moorish quarter. Ramiro shrugged his shoulders and pursed his lips to indicate his indifference.

In response to a shout from the old woman, two bearers ran up with their broad leather straps. Ramiro, unwilling to let his mind dwell too long upon the grave danger which he ran in thus exposing himself to some criminal attack, smilingly climbed into the chair. The leather curtains were so closely sewn together that not a single ray of light could penetrate them. The chair began to move. At last, after an interval of which it was difficult to estimate the length, it came to a halt.

Upon dismounting, Ramiro found himself in a gloomy, dilapidated room. The old woman bound a strip of black linen over his eyes and, taking his hand, conducted him along what seemed to be an underground corridor, to judge by the cold draught which fanned his shoulders and the dank, earthy smell.

He recalled similar episodes of which he had read in the novels of chivalry, and he thought that all this must surely be the prelude to some memorable adventure, worthy to be recorded throughout the ages to come.

"If my star," he now said to himself, "does not decree that I shall meet my death in this wise, every ruse will prove in vain. If, on the contrary, this is to be my end—of what use to pit myself against Fate?"

¹ Large pieces of furniture containing many drawers. Formerly manufactured in Bargas, a province of Toledo.

They descended several flights of stairs. Then the old woman whistled. A bolt was heard to fall, and a door creaked. A faint light penetrated the bandage which he wore across his eyes. An acrid odour of incense made his senses reel.

When the old woman had removed the bandage with her fingers, he found himself in a Moorish room with tiled walls and a roof of interlacing rafters. A stout man, clad in a long blue tunic, was walking away from them. There were old divans against the walls, fine carpets and mats upon the marble flooring, at the end of the room two arches of multi-coloured brick; and, here and there, a few little stools inlaid with ivory and mother-of-pearl. Upon one of them there stood a copper jar of perfumed incense from which three wisps of smoke rose straight into the air. The woman, leaving Ramiro alone, passed through into the other rooms, shouting "Aixa! Aixa!"

When she came back she approached the wall and, adroitly sliding a painted panel, removed the interior partition of a niche which was as deep as the wall was broad. It was one of those recesses surmounted by a tiny arch in which the Moslems were wont to keep their more or less elegant jars, filled with a special kind of water whose virtues are extolled to the skies by the winged words of laudatory inscriptions. At that moment there could be seen through the opening nothing more than two woman's slippers, of a cinnamon hue. Upon a gesture from the old woman Ramiro, removing his cap, put his head into the recess.

He thought that he must be dreaming! It was an ablution chamber, over which there brooded a secret and somniferous calm. The light entered only through a few holes in the roof, covered with thick, star-shaped panes of glass, coloured in imitation of the carbuncle, the sapphire, the topaz and the beryl. On the opposite side of the room there was a deep alcove, lined with cushions upon which the pleasant languor induced by the bath could be savoured to the full.

But it was not the broad basin, lined with marble, sunk into the centre of the room, nor the starry panes, nor yet the cushions of velvet and brocade, which the youth devoured with his eyes. It was the naked beauty of a young girl who lay submerged in the bath.

Her loosened tresses, richly tinted with henna, floated upon the surface of the water in thick, abundant locks, like skeins of silk destined to be woven into a whole mantle. Some strands, to which the unguents still clung, hung over one side of the basin. Were they indeed her tresses—or were they not rather serpents under the charm of some strange spell? . . . Ramiro gazed enraptured at the graceful eyelids, fringed with dark lashes, beneath the eyebrows skilfully widened with kohl. And that rare smile, that smile of dreams, which trembled upon her lips as though they had been brushed by some invisible wing!

Suddenly the girl raised her eyelids in alarm, gazing wide-eyed at the part of the wall through which Ramiro was looking. He had, however, made not the slightest movement.

Just then a servant, dressed only in a narrow skirt of green and yellow, entered the room, supporting upon her brown, naked breasts a gilded tray which bore the pomander boxes, the toilet jars, the brushes, the curling-irons, and other small objects which the youth could not clearly distinguish. Shortly afterwards, kneeling beside the edge of the bath, she began to anoint the body of her mistress with a rosy, liquid substance, redolent of musk. The girl gave a sudden start, like a trapped fish, afterwards parting her lips as though she were breathing a hidden and voluptuous perfume. She once again directed her gaze to the recess in the wall. At length she rose to her feet. Her damp hair grew stiff when out of the water, rigid, heavy, rustling, like sea-weed laid bare by the tide. Then her two brown breasts stood out firmly, gilded, almost, like amber cups; and the youth felt in every fibre of his body the allurement of that

straight form with the swelling hips, glowing in the half-light with iridescent drops.

With a silvery jingling of anklets and bracelets the girl walked towards the alcove, leaving behind her a watery trail as her feet trod upon the marble. When the servant had slowly dried her and scraped the unguents from her hair with a shard, she reclined at full length upon the cushions and offered herself, in deathlike abandonment, to the ointment and the brush. Shortly afterwards the man in the blue tunic, whom Ramiro had noticed as he entered, appeared. He held in his hands a barber's razor and a shaving dish. Approaching with respectful eagerness, he began, in accordance with the Oriental custom, to shave the Moorish girl.

Then, far away above the tempest of his senses, Ramiro heard the voice of his conscience raised in indignant protest against this lascivious cult of the bath, this libidinous worship of the flesh. The sublime chastity, the abandonment of the ascetic, the hatred and mortification of the putrefying husk which we call our body, the holy foulness of monks, those splendid anchorites who allowed their garments to rot upon their skin in anticipation of the grave; St. Hospice, devoured alive by lice; St. Macarius, buried up to the neck in ordure; St. Mary the Egyptian, scorched black by the sun, like a scrap of leather; St. Pelagia, lying upon her own excrement; St. Isabel, drinking the water in which those afflicted with scurvy had washed; the sublime aspirations of Christianity spreading their pure wings above the carnal manure-heap; penances, disciplines, hair-shirts, all flashed across his mind with lightning clarity.

But the stern vision was not of long duration. His senses were straining at the leash. The whirlwind of sex extinguished those interior lights. Before him was a beautiful woman, within two paces of his lips, his youth! Overcome by temptation, and trembling like a rush-stick in a torrent, Ramiro did not see the servant who, making a *détour*, was coming forward to take

the slippers from the recess in the wall. The woman, seeing a human head within the niche, uttered a cry of terror.

A moment later the door which led into the ablution chamber was opened, and the youth saw the beautiful *morisca* emerge, her hair bound with a graceful net of golden thread adorned with emeralds. A white veil fell from her head down to her wide trousers of green taffetas decked with tassels. Without looking at Ramiro, she approached the niche as though about to examine the wall. Then, turning aside, she vented her wrath upon the old woman in the harsh, guttural phrases of her *algarabia*.¹ A dark flush, like the velvety crimson of roses, mounted to her cheeks; but so soon as she recognised the youth a hospitable smile, magical, enchanting, which revealed the whiteness of her teeth, gave to her face the tranquil clarity of the moon.

"Ah! are you Señor Don Ramiro?" she exclaimed. "You are indeed welcome. Pardon me if I hurt you yesterday when I threw the flower into the street. I wanted to fling it upon your hat."

"The flower did me no hurt," replied Ramiro, "but rather your smile."

"Be silent! I was laughing with delight at having you so near to me. I was crouching against the lattice, and you did not see me!"

Returning to the ablution chamber, she lay face-downwards upon a divan in the alcove, offering Ramiro a cushion upon which to seat himself. They chatted for a long time. It was a strange colloquy for the youth, almost fabulous. The Saracen girl asked him innumerable childlike questions. The metal fringe which hung down upon her forehead enhanced the mystery of her eyes. From time to time she would offer Ramiro fondants in her hands laden with rings, laughing again and again as she, in her turn, nibbled the sweetmeats, laughing like some half-savage woman, with a certain incom-

¹ Arabic.

prehensible and delicious sensuality, while her eyelashes, long and restless, seemed to distil a mysterious perfume of luxury and magic.

XV

WHEN Ramiro found himself once again in his own house, among the familiar objects of his room, he removed his sword and cape, unbuttoned his doublet, and threw himself down upon the bed. He felt that he was living within the pages of some romantic tale. He was in that vague, indecisive state of mind which blurs the borderline between dreams and reality; he experienced that severance from all contact with the objective world, that sensation of floating above existence which follows upon all great adventures of the spirit. Temptation was turning his brain, scattering piecemeal all his thoughts, holding them resolutely asunder. Vainly did his conscience endeavour to apprise him of the danger to which his religious sentiments were exposed by the charms of so beautiful a woman. Unearthly voices, strident, fatidical, resounded within the gloomy depths of his soul, announcing inexplicable portents. He shut his ears, mocking his own terror. So sure was he of the profound religious faith within him! And even though she were an infidel—what did it matter? That voluptuous joy would be but momentary, a twinkling of life's eye. His desire once sated, he would know how to hurl the cup far from him before he reached the dregs. And who could tell? Was it not possible that this woman might, between her kisses, disclose the secret of which he was in search? Ah! if that were the case, how certain could he be of the Canon's absolution. "Remember that you will do it with a holy purpose"—were not those his very words? Had he not advised him to engage upon some amorous adventure in order to facilitate the performance of his mission?

He returned to the house in the Moorish quarter not once but many times. He felt that it would be useless to resist. The perfume of this girl kept him in a state of continual intoxication. It pervaded the very air he breathed, clove to the roof of his mouth, clung to his hands, his clothing—the haunting odour of a woman's body, mingled with the scent of jasmine and of musk.

He could still feel upon his lips the clinging sweetness of her long, moist kisses. She had not inflicted upon him the torments of a prolonged impatience. At the second visit, after sprinkling her hair with perfume, she had given herself to him with so grave a frenzy, that love in her arms took on the character of a sacred rite. Her lips were parted in a voluptuous smile, compounded of joy and pain, as though she wished to feign the dolorous delight of virgins.

The loadstone of sensuality grew more powerful every day. Few now the days upon which Ramiro did not spend some hours in Aixa's company. Sometimes, when seated by her side, he was overwhelmed by a flood of anguish. Then he would wrinkle up his forehead and gaze fixedly before him, while Aixa glued her lips to his in a delicious kiss, sweet and lukewarm as a date. The strange caress would always fire his whole being into a sensuous glow.

At last, totally forgetful of the mission which he had to fulfil, his will undermined by passion and enervated by luxury, Ramiro unconsciously came to accept all those refinements which adorned the daily life of his mistress. At an early stage in their intimacy, Aixa had fingered with disgust his coarse, hairy clothing and offered him in its stead, for the hours of delight, a silken garment or a fine linen robe perfumed with musk.

His feet came to know the delicious softness of Moorish slippers, and his hair the caress of the gauze which she wound around his head in endless rolls, fastening them in front with a jewelled brooch. He allowed the slave to rub him and smear his limbs with

perfumed unguents. He allowed them, as a jest, to blacken his eyebrows with kohl; and his fanatical horror of the bath vanished when his mistress initiated him into the sweets of love in the perfumed water, upon which she would drop handfuls of rose petals, some pale, some crimson, symbolising the twofold delight of her body.

Sometimes, when the youth's pupils grew cloudy, like pools in a storm, the *morisca*, freeing herself from his arms, would ask him:

"Dost thou give me all thy soul as well—all? Wilt thou take the same loves, the same faith as thy Aixa?"

Ramiro nodded assent; but when, as they went back into the depths of the alcove, she again asked him: "Dost thou swear it, dost thou swear it?" he caught her in his arms and mumbled like one intoxicated: "Yes, yes—I swear it, I swear it!" At other times, during the hours of satiety, the Saracen girl would sit erect upon the cushions and, with trembling lips, declaim some evangelical verses from the Koran. Ramiro thought he could recognise in the inspired phrases the words of the New Testament recorded by the Moors of Spain: "Laud to Mary. . . . Blessed be the day upon which she departed from the bosom of her family on her journey to the East, taking a veil with which to cover herself, the day when we sent her Chibril, our spirit in human form. 'I bring you a message from the Lord,' said the angel, 'I come to announce that you shall bear a Holy Son.' 'Whence can he come, this son?' replied the Virgin. 'I have known no man; I have never sinned.' 'Thy Son shall be the wonder and the Saviour of the world.'"

She also told him the story of how Jesus encountered a corpse, an ancient legend about which there clung an odour of the charnel-house, an unearthly aroma, importunate as death.

The "sayings of the maiden Carcayona" were at once beautiful and terrible. Reclining face-downwards beside him, her eyes hidden by the large fillet of medallions,

her chin upon her hand, her finger upon her lips, naked, sinuous, she stammered out the story of the golden dove with the tail of pearls, and when she described the delights of Paradise she caught him in her arms, cool as the fountains of Salsabil and Alcáfar, gluing her lips to his in a frenzy of desire.

When at last, as the days flew by, their souls attained to a passionate communion, they confided to one another their most intimate sorrows. In moments of languor, Ramiro felt the thought of life's brevity, the transience of all mortal things, brush his forehead like some spectral wing. On one occasion, as he felt the sleepy rise and fall of the woman's breast against his own, he said to her with a gentle melancholy:

“And to think, Aixa, that the day may come when we shall gaze at one another with hatred should we chance to meet in the street.”

“It may be so—it may not,” replied the Saracen girl. “Our destiny is bound about our necks.” Then, as though she fancied that the long-anticipated moment had arrived, she left the alcove and, taking from a stool a red ivory casket, extracted therefrom an ancient book:

“All things change, it is certain,” she exclaimed, “and perchance the day may come when thou wilt deliver me up into the hands of the executioners. But in this book, written by the sage Abentofail, is taught the happiness which changes only to grow more intense.”

Then, in low, mysterious tones, she added: “It almost passes comprehension.” She then confessed that she would never have been able to understand it without the aid of a certain man who was then living in Ávila.

Ramiro, on hearing this last remark, shifted his position on the cushions, his eyes aglow with eager curiosity.

“He can easily be recognised,” said the Moorish girl, in a clear, jubilant voice; “he always carries in his belt a dagger in a golden sheath studded with diamonds

from Krishna, beryls from Khasbah, pearls from El-Katif. The hilt of his dagger is carved out of loadstone, and in a trice it can suck up all the blood in a man's veins. His beard shines like silver, and his face is beautiful as the moon on its fourteenth day. He never laughs, his step is slow and solemn."

The Saracen girl, as she let fall these admiring words, one by one, like pearls upon a silver tray, narrowly scrutinised the young man's face. Then, with a haughtiness of phrase and gesture which Ramiro had not observed in her before, she declared that there existed no happiness in this world comparable to that of the man who devotes himself to the contemplation of the One, True, Eternal Being, his thoughts for ever fixed upon Its majesty and Its splendour, so that death may come upon him in that state. The Book of Abentofail taught, according to Aixa, a mode of access to the Supreme Vision.

Seated upon the steps of the alcove, she began to read. The book was written in Arabic; but she translated the phrases into Spanish, afterwards summarising the chapters in her own way. Her voice trembled. An indefinable something, sacred and subtle, quivered about her like a halo. Her drooping eyelids took on a supernatural purity, and Ramiro listened, growing more and more absorbed, a thousand contradictory thoughts jostling one another in his mind.

According to this teaching one should, in order to alienate oneself from corruptible matter, eat less and less every day. After this one should endeavour to model oneself upon the stars, for the stars are immaculate, ecstatic, immutable, outside the world of death and decay. Their rational essences contemplated the One throughout eternity; and nothing availed so well to withdraw oneself from the sensible world and enter into that state of intoxication, that sublime delirium, as the imitation of their movements by means of the dance and an endless rotation. Then the Sublime

Sphere, whose essence is non-material, could manifest Itself, and the essence of the One and of the Sphere can only be compared to the image of the sun in a polished mirror, an illusory image which is neither the mirror nor yet the sun, but which is compound of both.

The youth grew confused. He had been listening to the very words and teachings of Christian mysticism. The rapt expression, the pallor, the convulsive twitching of the girl's countenance, revealed that ecstasy was about to flood her soul.

When she had finished her reading, the Saracen girl rose to her feet and slowly took up another veil. As she removed the lid of a coffer and extracted a silken cloth, dyed saffron and embroidered with multi-coloured arabesques, a heavy perfume diffused itself throughout the room, as though some window overlooking a beautiful orchard, ripe and fragrant, had just been opened.

Her only covering the yellow veil, whose fringe reached down to the ground, Aixa took up her position at the end of the room, her hands upon her hips, her elbows raised, her head thrown back. Two crimson roses glowed like flames in her copper hair. Her body, gracefully contorted, began to sway upon her haunches. Her thick, pallid lips were distorted with pain and desire. She pressed her knees closely together, as though something agonising and yet delicious had penetrated her spirit.

Suddenly, from a neighbouring room, there came the clear, harsh sound of music, a monotonous, barbaric clanging of tambourines and dulcimers, a twofold harmony, dazzling as an arena, gloomy as the interior of a bazaar.

Aixa, with a tinkling of gold and ivory, beat with her feet upon the tiles. Her eyes distant, she gyrated, exhaling a sweet perfume, like that of a moist flower shaken upon its stalk. Then she began to turn quickly, very quickly, more quickly still, frenziedly—until her whole body seemed a diaphanous spindle, a golden oval,

a fury carried away on the frail music of anklets and bracelets.

The dance came to an end, the movement growing slower and slower. Aixa's feet jostled one against the other and her head, laden with God knows what prodigious visions, at length fell upon her shoulder.

Ramiro, lying face-downwards upon the bed, had not once averted his eyes from his mistress, and when he saw her tottering so piteously he ran to support her. Aixa, however, was already lying upon the tiles, her teeth clenched, a shuddering groan escaping from her lips, as though she were trembling with cold. Her long tresses, in which jewels and rose petals were intertwined, lay spread out around her upon the ground. Her face shone with a beatific joy. Her whiteness excelled that of all the world's white things, orange blossom, lilies, snow. Ramiro remembered the accounts of the ecstasies of St. Teresa of Jesus and other faithful servants of the Lord. He thought also of his own mother, when, after hours of praying in the oratory, she had suddenly fallen to the ground as though struck down by a delicious death. It was the same pathetic pallor, the same trembling of the lips, the same shuddering of the eyelids over the light-intoxicated pupils. No—she could not be a sorceress. She had used the very language of the mystics, and without the aid of philtres, unguents, or incantations she had, by contemplation alone, attained to the seventh heaven of ecstasy.

He called her several times: "Aixa! Aixa! Aixa!" stroking her arms, her cheeks, her throat, her breasts; but she lay there still, mute and icy as a corpse upon the marble. He tried to warm her cold lips with his, and in the grip of a perverse desire, covered her with passionate caresses. Never had she seemed stranger, sweeter to him than now. She was a delicious fruit embalmed in snow; her breath disquieting, ethereal, like the perfume of flowers upon a corpse.

XVI

RAMIRO continued to visit Aixa under the conditions of secrecy which had been imposed upon the first occasion. Every detail was reproduced, the détours, the bandage, the whistle. . . . But one day, realising how necessary it was for him to know the route, he took out his dagger, cut a hole in the leather curtains of the chair, and looked out. He was greatly surprised to see that the bearers were merely walking up and down within the courtyard of the house. The cistern, the pomegranate tree, a cage suspended from a pillar, and the same old woman seated upon a bucket in the shade, appeared again and again before the peephole. It was not, then, a journey through the Moorish quarter. Also, on almost all the days that followed, the *morisco* with the precious dagger appeared in the courtyard and, after a moment's conversation with the old woman, once again entered the rooms.

Another incident struck him as peculiar. Arriving one day about noon at the mysterious house, a little earlier than was his wont, he came unexpectedly upon the bellman of the cathedral, posted in the alley-way. The Portuguese turned on his heel and walked away in an easterly direction.

“I am certain,” said the old woman to Ramiro, “that this dog is going to meet Gonzalo, who awaits him yonder,” pointing in the direction of Santo Tomás; “they are laying some trap for you, sire.”

Aixa then revealed to him a more secret means of approach. Leading him into a room which adjoined the ablution chamber, she lifted the corner of a piece of tapestry which hung upon the wall. A wide opening revealed the dazzling spectacle of the mountains and the plain. This aperture had been hollowed out in the rock. It could not be distinguished from below, for two

large boulders effectively concealed it. It was not, however, difficult of access. Descending from the city into the valley, and making a long détour, Ramiro now entered through this loophole in the rock, the scaling of which stimulated his passion for adventure. Aixa awaited him in the embrasure, holding out her arms in order to aid him in the ascent. But now they no longer spent all their hours upon the gorgeous cushions. When evening fell, she took him to an open terrace which looked out towards the south. It was an ideal spot for prayer and contemplation, surrounded by a tall parapet of reddish stone, over which one could command a view of the valley country and the sierras. A thin, continuous, sweet-smelling wisp of smoke rose into the air from the incense jars. A single cypress, of hoary age, reared its head to the skies in gloomy aspiration; and, in the centre, a pond reflected, with an hypnotic, melancholy calm, the tree, the smoke from the incense, the clouds, the constellations, and, at times, the moon, so clear and fine that Aixa, removing the net of pearls and emeralds from her hair, plunged her head reverently into the water. Then, as though she imagined that she had caught that curved diadem which at the slightest touch would break into a thousand fragments, she raised the net to her lips, uttering a passionate, shuddering, inarticulate cry, her damp rings gleaming in the half-light.

One evening they were seated upon the rocks, hand-in-hand, silently contemplating the calm enchantment of the mountains in the twilight, when Ramiro, suddenly turning his head, found himself face to face with the mysterious *morisco*, motionless and silent upon the terrace.

Aixa, in order to dispel the youth's surprise, introduced them with a slow smile. A moment later, seated upon a rug, they were calmly talking, and the *morisco*, in the purest Castilian, was asking for information concerning the principal gentlemen of the city, their

families and their connections. Meanwhile Aixa listened to the conversation, trembling with delight, and her glance passed rapidly from one countenance to the other as though she were comparing the features.

The sun was about to sink below the horizon. A faint perfume of marjoram and lavender stole up from the ravine. It was a warm, still evening. The sky, the valley, the houses, all glowed with a faint, purple light. Even the dark foliage of the cypress gleamed red in the west. Ramiro felt, as never before, the solemnity of the hour when the belfries seem to clothe themselves in gold and scarlet in order to peal forth the anglic salutation, and he reflected that he was, perchance, in the company of two beings of an alien faith, of two false converts. Would they say the *Ave Maria* with him? All were silent. Suddenly, like a thirsty pilgrim who hears far out on the horizon the cries from a caravanserai, the Moor bowed low to the ground and, lifting his hand to his ear, listened with rapt attention. It was, no doubt, the voice of the *muezzin*, the cry of the *idzan* from some neighbouring terrace. Aixa and the Moor rose to their feet and, in the centre of the carpet, sacerdotal, hieratic, they made the four prostrations of the evening *azala*. When they had finished, they both stood upon the boulders and, arm-in-arm, their eyes fixed upon some point on the horizon, they intoned the following prayer, in the peculiar accents of those who repeat sacred words, words whose echo is always resounding in their minds.

She said: "Sacred love and sleepless vigilance are knotted together like a cord to torment me."

He replied: "My heart is torn with the anguish of absence. My soul sighs at the first blush of dawn; it groans when the sun sinks in the west."

And they went on, in an alternating chant:

"If the wind blows from the fragrant valley, the whole earth is sweet with the perfume of musk, and my heart trembles with desire to be with my beloved."

“O thou who leadest the camels towards the abode of my beloved, when thou reachest the sepulchre of the man of Tehama, the most excellent, the most noble, the most compassionate one, salute him for me, for he alone can alleviate my suffering; and when thou art lost in wonder at the splendours of the land of Necked, remember my martyrdom, since for me there is no other *quibla* than the tomb of the prophet.”

As he listened to these words, at such a moment as this, the youth felt that a terrible blasphemy had been hurled in the face of the Lord; and a voice, superhuman, angelic, warned him from the depths of his conscience of his duty towards the Church of Christ and the memory of his forefathers.

Aixa went on: “The messengers have departed early in the morning for the gardens of Mecca and Medina, leaving me behind them as an hostage. They have departed upon their camels. The *kebir*, singing, leads them, and with them goes my heart to the beloved land of the Hedjaz. My heart is with the caravans. It will follow in the dusty wake of the camels.”

He replied: “Only the water of Zemzem can quench the fire of my passion. Happy indeed is he who drinketh of it! From me, a salutation to those who walk around the Hatim and the house of Abraham and the temple of La Cava!”

A silence fell—like that which follows upon the celebration of some rite. Ramiro felt strongly impelled to rise to his feet and spit in this man’s face. The *morisco* folded his arms, and Aixa lay upon his breast like a daughter.

Just then a metallic clangour resounded throughout the city. Then, near by, the bell of Santiago pealed forth. Others, in the far distance, answered it. The cathedral bells boomed out, low and solemn, and immediately all the churches together tolled their bells in fantastic concert, summoning the people to evening prayer.

Ramiro fell upon his knees, as though suddenly transfixed by a dart from heaven, and the Aves welled up from his soul in a fiery stream. Against a terrible background of infernal darkness, his closed eyes saw the flaming images of Purgatory pass by. He abased himself, he annihilated his being, bowed to the ground under the burden of his remorse, pleading forgiveness, pardon, for something hateful, detestable, heinous, of which he now, for the first time, felt the full weight, the full horror, upon his conscience.

Aixa and the *morisco*, locked in a close embrace, gazed silently, intently at the youth.

Far on into the twilight the city resounded with the melancholy chaunting of the bells.

XVII

Two days later, Don Alonso Blázquez Serrano, returning from a visit to the Señor de la Hoz, came across Ramiro on the staircase. The youth went down with him. When they reached the *patio*, Don Alonso, leaning against a pillar as though he were endeavouring to hide himself from the lackeys, told him without demur that people were beginning to gossip about his frequent visits to the Santiago quarter. Ramiro pleaded in excuse his vagabond curiosity and his desire to glean information concerning the suspicious habits of the converts.

“ Well answered,” replied Don Alonso, “ had I been some officious, impertinent fellow and not the faithful friend of your family, who has always looked upon you as his son! ”

A pause emphasised the intent of this remark.

“ Strange stories, indeed,” he added, endeavouring to mitigate the severity of his words with a smile, “ are being circulated concerning your doings. Some have it that you are in league with the Moors, in order to keep

them informed of the decisions made with regard to them; others assert that they have bought your conscience with presents and with gold. There are indeed some who state that you have made a bargain with the Devil through an old sorceress of the quarter. I am glad to say that I attach as much credence to this nonsense as I do to tales of monsters and giants; but, to speak plainly, I do not think that mere curiosity is an adequate explanation of your daily perambulations through the Moorish quarter."

The youth tightened his lips angrily and the blood rushed suddenly to his cheeks. What was to be done? With bowed head, he paced to and fro before the *caballero*; then, with tremulous pride, he revealed the secret mission with which he had been entrusted in the king's name.

"Ah," he added, "well do I know the source of these perfidious calumnies, and the breast into which I shall have to plunge my sword when I decide to avenge myself."

Don Alonso took Ramiro's trembling hand in his, and, his eyes bright with tenderness, gazed at him earnestly, saying: "Never have I doubted the honour of one in whose veins flows blood as pure and noble as yours; but I must confess that the words you have just uttered have removed an incomprehensible weight from my soul. Embrace me!"

They exchanged a formal salute.

Entering his chair, Don Alonso set out towards his house, resolved to favour the alliance between his daughter Beatrice and the youth upon whose proud forehead he had thought to read the signs of a great destiny.

The scene on the terrace and his recent conversation with Beatrice's father, had broken the spell of love which bound Ramiro. He now saw, in all their crudity, the hypocritical perversity of his conduct, his total forgetfulness of duty, his false confessions at the

feet of the minister of God. All for a woman of alien race, a woman into whose faith he had not wished to enquire too closely in order that the voice of conscience might not disturb his lust. What had he learned? Had he succeeded in discovering the slightest clue since he had formed the habit of frequenting daily that house within whose walls was jealously guarded the secret of the conspiracy?

He exerted an effort of will. He was ready to atone by any heroic action, however arduous, for the offence of which he had been guilty in the eyes of God. He had read in many religious books stories of great sinners who had redeemed their abominable lives by one single moment of sincere repentance. He would uproot his love for the Saracen girl from his heart, and stake his very life upon some prodigious deed of daring. Then, when people bowed low before him and none dared to cast a slur upon his honour, the time would have come to avenge himself upon Gonzalo de San Vicente, for it could only have been he, aided and abetted by the bell-ringer, who was spreading abroad in the city the malicious lies of which the hidalgo had spoken to him.

He went again on several occasions to the Moorish quarter and the mysterious house. Already the body of the Saracen girl seemed to leave in his nostrils an odour of unguents, incantations, and tainted flesh. With what delicious joy did he begin to feel the first symptoms of liberation! A savage delight in cruelty now entered into all his caresses. There were moments when he allowed his mind to dwell upon how he might most effectively make away with that woman, the charm of whose excessive beauty might again exert itself at a later stage of his life's destiny. In the secret places of his heart, he would fancy that he was pouring down her throat some subtle poison, or that he was strangling her with his own hands, and when he had killed her, with God as sole witness, that he was throwing her into the water together with all her boxes of paint and

perfume, so that the diabolical bath might serve her as a tomb. But he had heard it said that some women are clothed in death with a surpassing beauty. He then understood the sacred virtue of fire, the unique destruction of the stake, which left nothing but a black hideous mass of charred fragments.

She, on the other hand, grew more passionate, more voluptuous, more languorous at every meeting, as though her whole soul foresaw their separation and wished to hold more closely the object of its desire with the convulsive grasp of fingers clutching some precious crystal which eludes their touch. She no longer addressed him in superior, satisfied tones. Her bright smile grew sombre, fearful, like a mountain spring at nightfall. At every moment desolate sobs now choked her voice, and those bitter tears that trickled down upon her lips, that odour of weeping and anguish, only served to hasten her perdition.

When he felt her subdued completely to his will, like a carpet which one can roll or unroll with one's foot as fancy may dictate, Ramiro recovered his self-mastery, and his own victorious gestures awoke every cruel instinct in his soul. On more than one occasion he struck and bruised his mistress in his efforts to wrest from her the secret of the conspiracy. It seemed to him, in all good faith, that he had the right to torture this woman who had sought to drag him down into the depths of apostasy and perjury. When he thought that the Devil lay concealed within the body of that enchantress, he was filled with pride at having grappled with such an enemy, like Jacob in the darkness; and he, in his turn, would take the white hands of his Delilah, those treacherous, deceiving hands, and to obtain a sign from heaven, would crush her fingers tightly together, bruising them against her rings, while she, her eyes filled with tears, gazed up into his face without uttering a single groan of pain.

Ramiro did not lose a moment. At each visit he

would search every corner, have himself shown over the other rooms, tap the walls in the hope of discovering some secret spring. Aixa never ceased imploring him to fly with her from Castile. It was a monotonous refrain, her one despairing prayer. Near Granada, on the Genil, she would tell him, she had a house all white, white as her body, with a little red door, for him, for him alone—and she laughed, a servile, affected, almost tearful laugh.

One day, as she accompanied him to the window, Gulinar, the old *morisca*, told Ramiro that a genius who had risen from the water of the bath had revealed to her all that was passing in his, Ramiro's, soul.

“It is a secret,” she added, “which is hidden even from you.”

She told him Beatrice's name and all the details of his disillusion, and the thoughts which lay hidden in his heart. That bitter memory, which he had thought buried for ever, was now evoked by that woman, shaken and spread out before his eyes, like some imposing, impressive garment of olden days. After mumbling some mysterious words, the old woman took out from a drawer a small rag doll. The featureless head bristled with coarse stiff hair; the waist was slim; the skirts ample. Its throat was deeply punctured on either side. Ramiro knew only too well what that meant, and in the presence of this terrible power of magic he trembled for the young girl.

On that same afternoon, as he walked with the Canon across the threshold of the cathedral, Ramiro told him for the first time of his visits to the house of the *moriscos* and the beginnings of his adventure with Aixa, as though they had been of recent occurrence. The Canon, who was crunching the sand upon the tiles under his heels, listened attentively, clasping his Book of Hours to his breast with both hands. At length he answered:

“Your own words, my son, make me think that you are in grave danger of enchantment. This creature must

be one of those famous sorceresses who are wont to employ diabolical philtres, the potency of which can only be resisted by bodies which penance has fortified. I am not at all surprised at what you tell me concerning her great physical beauty, for the Demon stamps their features with his most subtle and alluring charms, and he himself is wont to take up his abode within their bodies—a fact of which we have continual demonstration. It is imperative, Ramiro, that you should cut this knot with a single sweep of the knife, as did King Alexander, so the ancients say. From the situation and the nooks and crannies of this house I, for my part, imagine it to be the site of clandestine meetings, and it now occurs to me that if you could manage to enter it at about ten o'clock at night, when no one is expecting you, you might catch them red-handed. It is in the parish of Santiago. He will help you in the enterprise. Ah! if I were your age—or, at least, if I did not wear this sacred habit!"

Ramiro at once remembered the loophole in the rock. He had already made up his mind. He took leave of the Canon and promised him that he would make the attempt that very night.

Vargas Orozco stood for an instant with his chin upon his book, his eyes fixed upon the ground. His sombre, ecclesiastical figure lent a gloomy aspect to the solitary *plazuela*, over which the dusk seemed to be sprinkling dark particles of powdered rust. His cloak fluttered in the breeze which stole up from the Street of Life and Death. A huge, phantasmal mitre, brilliant with amethysts and topazes, blazed out, faded away, and again blazed out upon the dark tiles at his feet.

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After swallowing a bare mouthful of his meal, Ramiro left his house unobserved, for night had already fallen. He had chosen his stoutest dagger and the sword which

Don Rodrigo del Águila, the majordomo of the empress, had given him. Beneath his cloak, and hanging from his belt, he also carried a Toledan buckler. He felt himself great and redoubtable, like the hero of a romance of chivalry. He descended in the direction of the quarter. It was a clear, translucent evening, the moon at the full. The valley resounded far and wide with the chirping of grasshoppers and the croaking of innumerable frogs and toads away towards the Adaja. A few creatures, invisible in the darkness, were jingling their tiny bells. The mountains, god-like, seemed to dream mysteriously in the silvery silence. All nature breathed happiness, peace, rapture.

The clear, august enchantment of the night excited in Ramiro's soul that peculiar emotion which it had never failed to evoke in him from the days of his childhood, and which now had the effect of cooling his ardour. He would have preferred for such an enterprise a sky in which the constellations shone in solitary splendour, speaking to his soul of the tutelary dead, of love, of glorious destinies. The moon was tragic, spectral, ominous. Its livid splendour made one think of errant shrouds, of animals bewitched, of ghostly monks who said their masses among the ruins of demolished monasteries. The witches cast their spells and mixed their unguents by that malefic light, which sapped the forces of nature and seemed to suck the blood from the veins of men.

Upon his left an invisible bird croaked. Was it a crow?

As he drew near to the rampart below the secret window, Ramiro hid himself behind the trunk of a green oak in order to take his bearings. Towards the east, one, two, three human shadows were stealthily approaching him. They reached the place, glanced from side to side, scaled the rocks, and disappeared through the window. A moment later a larger group descended by the footpath. Then one man alone, then three more, and, at last, a group of

ten or fifteen persons. The dark opening, like the mouth of some huge ant-hill, quickly swallowed them up. When more than an hour had passed by without anyone else appearing, Ramiro, in his turn, commenced the ascent. The window was half open. He lifted the tapestry. The first room was in pitch darkness. He lifted over first one leg, then the other. His buckler rattled against the tiled wall.

He began to make his way towards the ablution chamber, groping in the darkness with his staff.

XVIII

THE wound was large, circular in shape, as though it had been inflicted by the horn of a bull. A treacherous hand had plunged the dagger deep into his breast, upon a level with his heart, in a frenzied effort to eviscerate him.

Ramiro now felt the wound reopen; at the slightest movement the pain, a shattering agony, seemed to burst out from the scar in all directions, like a shower of red-hot sparks. During the last few days which he had spent in the Moorish house he had fancied himself cured for ever; but the descent from the window, followed by the journey in the chair to the town, had reopened the wound beneath its bandages. Then the arrival at the house, his mother's questionings, the coming and going of the servants, the changing of his garments; in fine, all the incidents of his return, had thrown him once again into a state of delirious excitement.

The doctors, after bleeding him profusely, ordered them to let the youth sleep. Now, at last, he was quite alone and in his own bed. The room was in darkness. A single dusty ray of sunlight entered through some crack, stamping the carpet with a burning patch which seemed to scorch the wool. Innumerable particles of

dust quivered in the beam, atoms of silence. It had just struck one.

Outside the sun is blazing, scorching the walls. Ramiro listens to the still murmur of the austere city of monks, the crowing of the cocks, the clanging of the convent bell, the staccato clattering of a donkey's hoofs upon the tiles of the *patio*. The fever hammers at his temples. In the centre of the room, upon a stool, there stands a jar of burning incense. The smoke gleams as it crosses the ray of sunlight, lighting up the furniture and revealing for an instant the figures upon the tapestry which covers the walls. He would have liked to feel at one with the peace of those familiar objects, and go to sleep, as in his childhood, between cool sheets perfumed with thyme and rosemary in old oak chests. But his head throbbed unbearably. A mortal paralysis crept down from his throat to his feet, depriving him of all the usual sensations of weight and touch. His brain alone retained the vibrations of life. It seemed to him then as though he were floating in the air, rocking to and fro at a great height. The fever cantered, galloped over the fields of delirium and dementia, and his skull, like some putrid gourd, was filled with a monstrous swarm of fancies which mounted one upon another with a persistent, glutinous despair.

After a long lapse of time, he seemed to awaken from this feverish delirium. The seizure had passed like a storm. A cold sweat broke out upon his forehead. His mind grew clear. Had someone entered the room? Doubtless night had already fallen. No sound could be heard in the house. Away down in the street the noise of footsteps could be heard, gradually receding. Perhaps it was the night patrol. Then, the first effort of his mind was to recall all the details of his adventure. Vague and confused at first, the romantic incidents reappeared in the form of emotions rather than images, until at last, spurred on by pride, they gained clarity and logical sequence.

He saw himself once again leaping through the window, lifting the tapestry, and then walking on tiptoe in the direction of the ablution chamber, his staff outstretched in the darkness. The moonlight, as it fell through the panes of glass in the roof, gave to the whole room the disconcerting aspect of a sepulchral cave. How changed that alcove in which he had spent so many idle and voluptuous hours! The door which gave access to the salon of the divans was ajar. With what intrepid joy did he see a ray of light penetrate the darkness!

Now he could see himself standing with his eyes glued to the crack. The Canon had not been mistaken. From thirty to forty *moriscos*, some wearing Moslem dress, were holding council, seated in a circle round the room. Ramiro noticed that the man with the jewelled dagger was not present. The Saracen girl was going from divan to divan, the men kissing her hands and arms with respectful sensuality.

At intervals, Ramiro checked the course of these mental images in an attempt to recapture the significance of the scenes which passed before him. What was the meaning of that arrangement of large needles for wicker work, whose points some of those present were testing on their palms; this dull, collective murmur; these homicidal gestures? What was he saying—that old man with the face of an African, who vociferated and gesticulated by the lighted torch, shaking from time to time his red cap embroidered with sea-shells, in order to attract attention by his rattling? Some emissary from Barbary who was urging them to throw off the Christian yoke? . . . All were enigmas, mysteries, creatures of another world.

A sudden silence fell. Glances were directed towards the door. Someone was expected. At last it opened, and a man from outside announced:

“The Pashaw!”

A low murmur of rejoicing escaped from all lips. Pupils dilated, bodies rose erect. Ah! would that it had

been possible for him to witness the concluding scenes of that spectacle! It was, doubtless, a secret envoy from the Sultan of Turkey.

If his dagger had not, unfortunately, brushed against the lock, he would have been able to continue his spying without arousing suspicion by his presence. But at that almost imperceptible sound the Moorish girl sprang to her feet. He fancied he could see her yet—walking slowly towards him, her great eyes fixed in terror upon the door. She had guessed aright. Hardly had she entered the ablution chamber when she cried:

“It is thou, Ramiro! It is thou!”

Then the terrible silent struggle—he endeavouring to watch what was happening, she clutching his garments, his shoulders, his throat, and whispering quietly, very quietly in his ear a despairing “No! No!” Already some men, bearing lighted torches, were entering by the other door which had just been opened, when his mistress put her hand over his eyes. The brutal kick in the stomach which he had then given her, and her cry as she fell on her back upon the marble, seemed vividly real to him as he recalled them to his mind.

The fever throbbed once more along his veins as he went on to picture the simultaneous movement among the *moriscos*, who rose from their cushions and rushed forward in disorder.

It was the great moment of his life, and he took a delight in perpetuating its double savour of courage and of death. Those men, who had seemed enervated and emasculated by slavery, hurled themselves upon him with amazing agility, drawing their swords and snatching up the torches. He saw at that moment, with absolute certainty, his immediate end, and prepared himself to sell his martyrdom dearly. He remembered that his courage had not failed him for a second. His virility infused an heroic warmth into every limb. And now he shouted out proud challenges in his delirium, fancying that he was still wielding the death-bearing

sword; and the struggle, in the light of the torches and the moonbeams, reconstructed itself in his imagination. Drawing back several paces, he swung his sword through the air in a circular sweep of splendid challenge which lent a terrible aspect to the blade. Then he bounded from one side to another, disarming and wounding his adversaries. It was as though he were brandishing a whole armful of rapiers. He stabbed a boy with long hair, driving the point deep into his breast. Another, who tried to terrify him by waving his scimitar, received a swift slash across the face. With two thrusts he gouged out the eyes of an old man, richly dressed, who came forward like a spectre in the moonlight. The *moriscos* scattered in terror. Then Ramiro, protecting himself with his buckler and drunk with a bloody fury, began to strike out right and left in the tumult, feeling at every blow the rustling of the clothing and the softness of the bodies into which the sword point entered as though they had been bladders of wine.

Not a single cry. It was a silent spectacle. Those who fell hardly uttered a groan. Suddenly he saw a slender youth, armed with a long Spanish sword, appear before him. A momentary shudder of apprehension ran through him. There was a gleam of white teeth, but at the first thrusts his adversary disappeared into the darkness.

A few moments later, Ramiro felt himself pinioned from behind and, immediately, a sharp pain shot through his breast, near his heart, a terrible pain which caused him to drop his sword. He remembered his swooning, and his cry of "Confession" as he felt death come upon him, and the coldness of water upon his limp hand.

All jostled one against another in their eagerness to deal the final blow and, half dead, he could still distinguish by the smoky light of the torches the mysterious *morisco*, the man with the dagger who, pushing his way through the rest, hurled himself upon him, covering

him with his body, as he repeated again and again in Arabic the same cry of "*Ebni! Ebni!*" . . . Then he lost consciousness.

What surprise, what utter amazement, on the following day when, as he came to life again, he found himself in the next room upon a perfumed bed, tended by Aixa, the old woman, and the magnanimous individual who had just saved his life! And during the days which followed—with what tender care had those infidels treated him! The man sought in Arabic books for recipes of herbs which Gulinar, the old *morisca*, went to gather in the neighbouring fields; and Aixa washed and bandaged the wound with hands which love had perfumed. An unguent, brought from China to Arabia by the soldiers, and from Arabia to the West by merchants, and which the Moor kept in a precious casket, worked the miracle of Ramiro's recovery. During the quiet hours, as though he had been a child, the women took it in turns to tell him gorgeous tales, like necklaces of precious stones, which made him dream of distant and romantic lands.

The parting words of the Moslem as, one September afternoon, they were leaving the mysterious house, remained firmly graved upon his memory. The sun was setting. Ramiro, whose wound was beginning to heal, was seated at the window which looked out on to the valley. The man entered slowly, and halted in front of him. For the first time, Ramiro saw him with spurs upon his boots, and they alone revealed his silent walk to the ear. A melancholy hauteur ennobled his whole bearing, and his gestures were elegant and virile.

"I am going to leave thee," he exclaimed. "The curse of the believers has fallen upon me. They are casting me out because I saved thy life. It matters not. I would only ask of thee in return that if thou art obliged to denounce them, warn these two good women in time so that they may fly."

Ramiro nodded assent.

"Thou promisest upon thine honour?" the man asked him at once.

"Yes," answered the youth.

"Thou swearest it?"

"I swear it."

"That is enough," replied the Moslem, adding: "May Allah, to whom all power, all glory, bring thee some day into our Holy Faith! Leave spying to villains, Ramiro. Do not persecute the unhappy *moriscos*, and inform thyself concerning those Djahvars of Cordova, mirrors of science, flowers of chivalry, whose blood still flows in this room."

The Moor bowed low for a moment, his hand on Ramiro's shoulder. When he raised his head, his eyes gleamed moist in the half-light. Then, taking the precious dagger from his belt, he begged Ramiro to accept it in memory of him. Then he climbed through the window. A man was awaiting him down below in the plain with a horse already harnessed. Ramiro watched him mount and ride away.

XIX

It was now imperative, thought Ramiro, that he should subdue the feverish ardour of his recollections and decide, during the truce which his fever had granted him, what he was to say on the morrow, when his mother again came into his room. He realised that he might die within a very few hours or lapse into a state of prolonged unconsciousness, and although the false converts had already, in all probability, taken steps to escape from justice, it was his supreme duty to reveal what he had witnessed. He had, however, pledged his word. He knew what such an engagement meant to an honourable *caballero*. The mere idea of the oath he had sworn filled him with a sacred and heroic exultation. How

many of his ancestors had faced death for sake of an "I accept," for an "I swear"! And especially in Ávila, where the Basilica of San Vicente stood, the most famous *iglesia juradera*¹ in the kingdom. It mattered not that the pact had been concluded with infidels. He remembered having read in the *Chronicles* that the Emperor Alfonso had been upon the point of causing his wife to be decapitated, together with the Archbishop of Toledo, because they had broken his royal word, pledged to the Toledan *Alfaquis*.²

The Canon arrived at dawn, and asked to be left alone with the youth. Scarcely was he seated by the bed, when in a voice too loud for the hour and the occasion, he demanded: "What happened?"

Ramiro, again burning with fever, answered that the time had not yet come for him to say anything upon that subject. Rather must he commend his soul to God, and he begged that the sacraments might be administered to him without delay.

"That cannot be," replied the Canon; alleging that if he heard Ramiro in his capacity of confessor he could make no use of his revelations.

Then, in the tones of one who is upon the point of death, the youth related how he had fallen upon the conspirators, and how they had surprised him and stabbed him.

The Canon had been present at many death-beds, and now, when he saw that dropping of the jaw, those lustreless eyes, he judged that his pupil was preparing for the eternal voyage, and that Death would not tarry much longer by that couch. There was no time to lose.

"Courage, courage, my son," he exclaimed. "Whether you are to die or no of this injury, God alone knows. But forget not that Death enters without knocking, like an alguazil of the king, when he resolves to carry us away. Courage, courage, brave fellow."

¹ Church in which oaths were sworn.

² Moorish Doctors of Laws.

He extracted from him a description of the mysterious house and of the chief conspirators. The boy remembered his oath and, not having the heart to choose his words, closed his eyes and remained silent.

The Canon was in despair. He shouted in his ear, paced with long strides about the room and, turning again towards Ramiro, he touched him upon the shoulder.

By midday Ramiro, whose spirit had been grievously tried, sent for the Canon.

“ Does your grace think,” he asked him, “ that there exists any honourable means of annulling an oath made to an infidel, and by which, I fear, I am injuring the cause of our Holy Church? Could not one write concerning this matter to the Nuncio of His Holiness at court? ”

“ If you have sworn an oath to some infidel,” answered the Canon, “ which works to the detriment of the Holy Church of Christ, there is no need of nuncios, popes or councils, but rather of a confessor who will purge your soul of so great a sin. If it is, as I imagine, a ‘ promissory oath,’ you lacked ‘ discourse of reason,’ as St. Thomas calls it; that is, a clear understanding of your action; now of this discernment you were deprived, since you were trying to make God an accomplice in an offence against His Church. Even by human laws such an oath is not binding, and the breaking of it does not constitute perjury; ‘ for the oath, which is an holy thing,’—so, if I remember rightly, says the law of Alfonso the Wise,—‘ was not devised for evil doing, but rather to encourage and preserve rectitude.’ ”

Then he treated the subject under two heads. Under the one he placed chivalrous and legitimate engagements, which the Church herself protected as sacrosanct, more precious than life itself. Under the other, illicit pacts, oaths that are anathema, oaths against the majesty of God or the interests of the Church. From these one should absolve oneself without delay, for if Death should surprise a soul in a like state of sin, it would be hurled into the most terrible torments of hell; more especially

if the oath were made to the advantage of the enemies of religion.

This eloquence had an immediate effect upon Ramiro. He hesitated no longer. The mere evocation of hell at such a moment as this caused him to reflect deeply. He recalled his numerous offences against the Divine Majesty during his intrigue with the infidel girl, and it seemed to him that his engagement was a millstone which the Devil had bound about his neck. He then told the Canon all that he had done since he left him in the *plazuela* of the cathedral that afternoon. He told him of the two modes of access to the Moorish house, giving him a description of Aixa, of Gulinar, and of certain conspirators. He believed that in this way he could purge himself of the terrible stain of his renegade loves, demonstrating, at last, to the Lord that no vestige remained in his soul of the old liaison.

On the following day Ramiro lapsed into a condition bordering upon agony. Only Doña Guiomar, accompanied by Casilda and an old servant, tended him.

He had lost a vast quantity of blood. In addition to the copious hemorrhage which had stained red the marble tiles of the bath, the two doctors, after a learned argument concerning the exact spot at which he should be bled, resolved to bleed him each in his own way, and, in the space of a few hours, veins had been opened in his arm and in his ankle.

His weakness resembled a slow decline into death. Fever threw him into a state of exaltation for a few moments, but reaction followed at once. He felt life ebbing out at every pore. It was a gloomy, glacial sensation. He seemed to be breathing the dank odour of the crypt of a convent in the sierras, which had terrified him as a child. He saw once more the innumerable skeletons piled one upon the other in the shadows, and thought, with a proud horror, of all that nameless human débris which lay there where it had been thrown, pell mell, in monkish disdain.

A pall descended upon his spirit, through which he could distinguish only the supreme abstractions: sin, remorse, punishment. These were the rocks which constituted the terrible and desolate landscape of his conscience.

Thus, between delirium and lethargy, did three or four days pass by. The fetid odour of gangrene permeated the neighbouring rooms. The most famous relics, borrowed from the convents and the families of the town, had, when placed in contact with the open wound, proved ineffectual. Twice did Ramiro receive the Extreme Unction, administered by his first master, the old Franciscan friar. Doña Guiomar had already given him up as lost. At last, upon the advice of various friends, she sent for a famous convert from the quarter, who could effect miraculous cures. The woman washed the wound copiously with a decoction, applied a plaster, prescribed a potion, and recommended that nothing should be allowed to touch the wound, unless they wished to poison it. Two days later, the delirium ceased and the fever subsided.

When he felt himself rising once more into life, like the Phœnix frequently cited by so many writers, both sacred and profane, Ramiro savoured with an eager delight the joy of living. Everything stirred him profoundly, and the miracle of the world held him once again in rapt amazement.

Seated now by the window, he watched with a childlike pensiveness the heavy clouds of early winter. He was again troubled by those elemental questions which had disturbed him in his infancy. Where is the hail made smooth and round? Who beats the drums of the thunder? Who makes the winds? Whence do they come?

Sometimes he would sit and gaze out upon the city. . . . The lordly houses spoke to him in a proud, triumphant language of the haughty glory of lineage; riches won in far-off legendary lands; the heroic adventures of the sons of Ávila who, even now, while their wives awaited

them by peaceful hearths, were fighting in divers countries that they might, some day, bring back the prize of glory to their rocky nests. This is what all that emblazoned granite, upon which his eyes never wearied of gazing, had to tell him.

His ambition, enfeebled by suffering, now burst forth anew with greater vigour than before. He imagined that God had not called him to His bosom because He wished him to fulfil some sacred mission upon earth. He had undergone the first test to which all great destinies are subjected. He called to mind the life-stories of the heroes. They had always walked upon the edge of a precipice in the early stages of their career. Was not the strongest blade the very one which had nearly broken upon the anvil? A new confidence in his glorious destiny now came to strengthen his herculean will. Intoxicated by his imagination, he was soon addressing himself in the admiring phrases with which his presence would soon be greeted wherever he might go. Then he examined and weighed up his chances. What lineage in Castile purer or more ancient than his own? His blood was as clear as a diamond. He was also destined to inherit one of the richest estates in Segovia. He thought without anxiety of the youths of other families, certain that he could be excelled by no one of them in wisdom, valour, or intrepidity.

Glory smiled upon him once more, like an impatient, naked slave, offering him her arms, her fascination and her songs.

XX

SEATED by the brazier, his eyes fixed upon the beams of the vaulted ceiling, Ramiro, lost in dreams, heard the door of the gallery open very slowly, and a figure in mourning robes entered the room. It was his mother. The nun's headdress, fastened down upon her forehead

with cuppings, completely covered her hair. Her face shone with a luminous pallor, the face of one purged of all carnal desires, all human failings. The light seemed to shine through the alabaster of her courtly hands, rendered fine and slender by their continual elevation in prayer. She was wont to hold them up to the light of the candelabra, in order to meditate upon the gloomy thoughts of death which the sight of her phalanges invariably excited in her mind, and to contemplate the inevitable end which awaits us all.

Ramiro gazed at her in astonishment. The features of Doña Guiomar were visibly contorted into an expression of grave sorrow. She spoke very quietly, with gentle caution, as one who fears to reveal the true causes of her grief. She told him that the Canon had just informed her of the details of his encounter with the *moriscos*. "It seems to me," she said gravely, "that thou couldst have avoided so great a danger, where it was a question of villains who might well have been left to the *alguazils*."

Then she spoke of the vanity of such sacrifices, of the disillusionments and disappointments attendant upon all ambitious deeds. "Thou didst this," she added, "for thine honour. Thou wilt be fortunate indeed if the splendour of thine action is not sullied by some calumny. He who like thee, Ramiro, has to tread in the paths which Holy Church ordains for him, what could he find upon this devious route but disillusion and vanity? All praise to the Divine Majesty if He has placed this in thy way in order to make thee vomit up, like another Ignatius, all the venom of the world. Forget not, my son, how patiently the Lord has willed to snatch thee from the arms of death itself—for we all regard it as a miracle—and consider well how imperative is thy duty to repay Him for this second life which He has deigned to grant thee."

After a brief silence, she explained to him that, as soon as he had recovered, he must prepare for his

journey to Salamanca. The bishop had promised to find him some good position later on, should he feel disinclined to take orders.

Ramiro heard this homily in silence, without betraying the least sign of emotion. It was a moment of solemn anxiety for his mother. Her whole being hung in suspense between joy and fear, as she awaited the word or gesture which was to signify all the good or all the ill which life could hold for her. At that moment a lackey hastily entered the room to announce that Don Alonso Blázquez Serrano was mounting the staircase.

The youth glanced rapidly at his clothes, pulled up his stockings, tightened the laces of his doublet, asked his mother for a new ruff, and then for a mirror, a comb, and a box of pomade to arrange his hair. This he did with obvious complacency, endeavouring to assume a dignified expression before his own image in the mirror. He needed a piece of jewellery. He asked impatiently for the golden chain, which his mother hung around his neck with her own hands. Then, pointing to an inlaid secretaire, he bade her hand him the jewelled dagger, which she would find in the centre drawer. Doña Guiomar, as she took up the weapon, stood for a moment in pensive hesitation. Then, slowly unsheathing the blade, her eyes fixed upon the Moorish inscription on the steel, she began to tremble from head to foot as though she had seen a ghost.

The lackey returned, remaining in order to draw the curtain. She had just time to hand the weapon to her son and to throw some grains of incense, which she extracted from her purse, upon the red-hot coals.

Don Alonso, dressed entirely in black, looked, in the lighted embrasure, like a portrait in its frame. Even the detail of the lifted curtain was not lacking. His starched ruff lent an added sternness to his countenance. He made a low bow and came forward in measured steps to kiss the hands of his friend's daughter.

While removing his gloves, he congratulated Ramiro

with the air of a magnanimous king, comparing the youth's brave action to the great deeds which the Águilas, the Hoces, the Arias, the Alcántaras had performed in the service of God and country. From time to time, he passed his hand through his curled hair, casting suspicious, furtive glances at the mother; or, in order to emphasise the sincerity of his words, laid upon his breast his right hand, gleaming with Florentine rings. His hands were extremely beautiful and their excessive whiteness betrayed the fact that he wore at night mittens greased with a preparation of tallow.

"The service which your grace has rendered to the Church and to the king," he said to Ramiro, before taking his leave, "apart from your intense suffering—for that is unworthy of notice by men of your lineage—cannot go unrewarded. To-morrow I must leave for the court. I shall ask that you be granted the Order of Alcántara, and I know one who will be delighted to accede to my request. Your grace," he added, "has only to collect the documents which prove the purity of your blood, and that would be as though one tried to prove the light of the sun itself!"

Ramiro expressed his gratitude and, with shining eyes, took that generous hand in his.

Hardly had the courtier left the gallery, when Doña Guiomar threw herself at Ramiro's feet, clasping his knees. Her face hidden, and trembling with sobs, she uttered inarticulate words, while her son cried repeatedly: "Rise, mother; rise. What ails thee? Why weepest thou?"

At last she raised her tear-stained face, and, after a moment's pause: "I weep for a great misfortune," she replied—"the most terrible, the most cruel that could befall me: thy forgetfulness of God, Ramiro; thy perdition!"

"My forgetfulness of God, mother? What meanest thou?"

"Yes; the Devil has conquered thy soul. Thou

art blinded by the vanities, the empty prizes of the world. When Don Alonso spoke to thee of this Order I seemed to see the light of hell gleam in thine eyes. Who can have worked so great a change in thee? What spell have they cast upon thy soul?"

Then, her voice shaken by sobs: "Thou art no longer the child of my womb, who trod so happily the path of humility and penitence and who offered up his life to the Lord in his infancy, my Ramiro of long ago, my blessed little boy!"

With these words she again buried her face in her hands, without rising from the ground. A moment later, however, that mother torn by anguish, that being who seemed capable only of prayers and tears, sprang straight to her feet, standing erect before Ramiro.

It was an astounding transformation, a rekindling of the spirit as sudden as a bolt from a cross-bow. All the fire and pride of race shone for one moment in her eyes, which blazed like those of some outraged abbess.

And then in firm, authoritative tones: "Enough of this weakness. As soon as you are in a fit state, you will set out for Salamanca to finish your studies. There you will choose between the Church and the Order. Such is my wish."

With this, she gravely walked away, leaving behind her in the room, together with the faint odour of wax which permeated her garments, an inexorable, pathetic something, which Ramiro felt floating above his head like a Damoclean curse. The room grew dark; but the steward's daughter soon appeared, guarding with her hands the flame of a gilded lamp, whose light gave her the appearance of an image among votary candles.

XXI

IN the course of a few years, the sleepy mansion of Don Iñigo had been transformed into one of the liveliest and most frequented houses in Ávila del Rey. One day, Don Alonso Blázquez Serrano had summoned a few persons of rank to Don Iñigo's house, in order to discuss the question of the converts. These reunions were of frequent occurrence. The number of guests gradually increased, and to the simple cup of chocolate were added pastries and sweet cakes. Such was the origin of the distinguished salons of the Señor de la Hoz.

Every Wednesday and Sunday, after their siesta, the noblest and most scholarly men of the city would flock to his palace. In the course of time, law was laid down at these reunions, and the *regidores*¹ themselves would go there to talk over their decisions. It was an unexpected triumph which the Señor de la Hoz, however, had certainly not desired. At first, he had been profoundly disturbed; a veritable domestic panic had ensued upon this unexpected invasion of his domain, and he lost much time in racking his memory to recall by what involuntary remark or gesture it might have been provoked. To him alone was its cause obscure. This thriftless, ailing old man, who could not seriously be regarded as a rival by anyone, was an ideal host, whom Providence had especially ordained for the task. Don Iñigo, although connected by marriage with the oldest families in the city, had held himself completely aloof from the ancient feud between the San Juans and the San Vicentes which had divided the nobility of the commune; also the rooms of his palace were large, the servants numerous, and the pastry beyond reproach.

The noisy assemblage filled the salons to overflowing. In addition to the most important group, which

¹ Aldermen; councillors.

numbered those of the highest rank, minor circles of modest acolytes and humble lay brothers were formed. In these took refuge, avoiding the full light, those deferential nobodies who were beginning to find their way into the reunions, without anyone knowing who had invited them; the squirelings, friends of a friend of Don Iñigo and, attracted by the odour of the banquet, the governor of the Alcázar, the chaplain of the convent, the notary public. . . .

They were not long in discovering the besetting vanity of the Señor de la Hoz, and there were few guests who failed to ask his advice concerning the question of the *moriscos*, or make some flattering enquiry concerning the heroic services which their host had rendered to his country in the Alpujarra campaign. By dint of continual flattery, they were gradually creating for him a brilliant reputation which offended no one, and already the people of the town had begun to utter his name in profoundly respectful tones, as though they were indeed speaking of one of the most celebrated captains in that holy crusade of vengeance.

Don Iñigo at length came to derive great pleasure from these meetings. He increased the number of his servants, provided them with new liveries, purchased new braziers, new lamps and candelabra. He redeemed his finest tapestries—which he had pledged with the Genoese. The servant whose duty it was to prepare the chocolate and the wines was the second sacristan of St. Peter's, a friend of Medrano's. Three slaves ground the flour, a famous pastrycook from Madrigal prepared the cakes, a *morisco* the mead. The majordomo, in the dress of a Flemish seigneur, directed the movements of the servants by means of almost imperceptible signs. At nightfall, the guests walked out between a double file of lackeys posted along the length of the corridors as far as the street door, each bearing a lighted waxen taper. As many candles were burned at Don Iñigo's as in the cathedral. Everything was lordly, magnificent.

Ramiro imagined that when he again appeared at the meetings all eyes would be upon him, and that even the most illustrious personages would come forward to congratulate him upon his prowess. Almost cured of his wound, but weak and debilitated, he donned one afternoon his finest habit, put the Moorish dagger in his belt and entered the small apartment which did service as first reception chamber. Apart from the chaplain of the Annunciation and a Franciscan monk from San Antonio, / those present on that occasion looked at him with a lack of astonishment which amounted almost to personal insult; and the two or three people who spoke to him of his exploit did so in terms which they might have employed in referring to the more or less laudable vigilance of a constable. Disillusion left him amazed, and, without the heart to pass on to the next room where the prelates and magnates were assembled, he sat down in the darkest corner, among a group of monks. The Franciscan, approaching his stool, said in a low voice:

“A mere bagatelle—to have discovered the den of those wolves! It is clear that your grace also has his calumniators, his detractors; but take no heed of that, for what they are now saying will be of as little avail as chaff before the wind.”

“And does your reverence then think that someone has been slandering me?” asked Ramiro.

“Idle tales, idle tales,” replied the monk with a gesture of disdain.

“If your reverence wishes to prove his regard for me, he will hide nothing, for it can never be harmful to know the place where we may expect attack.”

“Tush—the lying stories of rogues . . . that your excellence has been upon the point of denying the faith of Our Lord Jesus Christ . . . , that he acted as a spy for the converts . . . , that he quarrelled with them upon the question of payment. . . .”

At that moment, on Ramiro’s right, an unknown youth in soldier’s dress, holding back a lackey by the breeches,

exclaimed: "Hola, Señor Antofíco, do not prolong our fasting. For pity's sake hand us another plate of cakes and some glasses of St. Martín, for we are dying!"

The tone of acute distress in which he uttered these words, his hand pressed upon his stomach, provoked a loud burst of laughter from those standing around. Someone spoke to him in a low voice, and, with a sidelong glance at Ramiro, he put his finger to his lips, as though abashed.

Meanwhile Don Alonso was chatting in the next room with some gentlemen who had just arrived. Turning his head, he saw Ramiro in the distance and, with a gesture of surprise, came forward to greet him.

"Welcome," he exclaimed, holding out his arms. "But why so bashful? All these gentlemen are eager to set eyes upon your grace and to hear what you have to tell."

"Sire, I feel extremely weak and infirm."

"It will give me great pleasure to hear your grace tell, in the presence of an assembly such as this, the whole story of your adventures with the *moriscos*, point by point."

"Upon some other occasion, sire. At present I feel that so much talking will provoke another attack of fever."

Just as Ramiro uttered these words, Don Alonso noticed, with an uneasy curiosity, the Moorish dagger, inlaid with precious stones, which the youth wore in his belt, and, unable to conceal his surprise, he at length took it in his hand, exclaiming:

"A fine dagger. Is it perchance some family heirloom?"

"No, sire, the old *morisco* who prevented the others from stabbing me to death, gave it to me as a souvenir."

The hidalgo frowned, and placing his right hand upon Ramiro's shoulder, said in a low voice, so that no one else could hear: "If you value the honour of your name, return to your room and hide that dagger where no one will be able to find it, for well do I understand its significance."

"I wear it, sire, as a valued prize, a memento of my exploit."

"Your grace must not take offence at my importunity, for loyalty is of necessity harsh at times."

"What is the meaning of this anxiety? In God's name, tell me!"

"Ah well, then, I will tell you. Scoundrels have taken it into their heads to invent a story as to how, when and why your grace accepted money and presents from the converts, and when they see this jewel in your belt they will all point to it as a proof of their calumnies."

Ramiro understood. Overwhelmed by the fatality of his destiny, he buried his forehead in his hands and, unable to articulate a single word, or utter a solitary cry, he embraced Don Alonso and retired to shut himself up in his room.

As a general rule, by the time the meeting commenced, Don Alonso Blázquez, talking incessantly, had already been installed for several hours in his favourite arm-chair, opposite to Don Iñigo. He almost invariably arrived at noon, taking his leave upon the ringing of the Angelus—when he did not invite himself to dinner, to be followed by a game of whist with the old man. Intimacy had earned for him especial privileges. He strolled from room to room as though he were in his own house, joked with the monks, knew all the servants by name. His position was certainly unique. His old friendship with the Count of Chinchón and his relationship to the Marquis de Velada caused the less informed to credit him with great influence at court, an illusion which he himself would foster by constantly repeating the two or three words which, during his long life as a courtier, the monarch had addressed to him. He professed for the king an admiration which was only equalled by his secret detestation of that crowned spectre whose mere glance could freeze the very marrow of his bones.

All were aware of his impeccable loyalty and his

mania for flattering the ambitious: “Why, Sir Dean, do you hesitate to demand the mitre which you so richly deserve?” “Your worst enemy, Sir Lieutenant, is your own modesty, for I know many men who, having rendered to the state a moiety of the services which, as we all know, stand to your credit, are now governing towns and commanding armies. If it does not displease your grace, upon my next visit to court . . .” and he would whisper some dazzling promise into the soldier’s ear.

The conversation turned almost invariably upon themes of his choosing. He took a pride in his loquaciousness. To ask him a question was to open the gates of a lock. His words swept like an endless flood over the surface of things, and the harsh tones of his loud, hoarse voice were never modulated. When he spoke of his travels and adventures, of the famous masters he had met, of precious things, or when he discoursed learnedly upon love, his words had all the jauntiness of his personality; but when he touched upon the king’s government, the habit of dissimulation acquired at court caused him to make use of colourless, empty phrases, full of circumlocutions and prolix reservations concerning the hidden reasons for the prince’s decisions.

On the other hand, Señor Diego de Bracamonte, of the house of Fuente del Sol, a descendant of Mosén Rubí de Bracamonte and a connection of the most noble families of Castile, would criticise the policy of the monarch with an heroic recklessness. His arrogance towered to the skies, solitary and aloof. His words unfurled themselves like a banner of revolt. Even his looks and gestures were audacious. Everyone realised that his head was set none too firmly upon his haughty neck, and a catastrophe was expected at any moment. The hidalgo, however, gave it out that he cared not a fig for the risk of denunciation to which he was exposing himself, and he spoke out even more boldly in the presence of the chief magistrate, Don Alonso de Cárcamo,

or the Dominican friar whom all took for a spy in the employ of the Holy Office and the king. His feudal challenge lost none of its vigour. It seemed to fly, like a cartel attached to an arrow, away over the ramparts to the court.

He was tall and lean. His velvets and flounces of corded silk stuck out like feathers from his birdlike frame. His ruff was always a little too large for him. His moustache, his sleek hair and pointed, goatee beard were streaked with grey, but his eyebrows had remained dark, like two blackbird's feathers. His complexion was sallow, his glance stern, his gestures manly and imperious. One could tell at once that his temper was of the quickest. He was no great scholar, but never failed to sprinkle his conversation with a few Latin quotations concerning the decadence of states.

The contempt with which the sovereign continually treated the opinion of the Cortes, the new imposts and private levies which were introduced without its consent, the annulling of the Alfonsine ordinances, the abolition of the franchises, the decay of the *fueros*¹—these were the favourite themes of his harangues. According to him, the government had degenerated into a rack for the purpose of extracting money and strangling aspiration. Spain, which had surpassed in valour Greece and Rome, was now trembling fearfully under the pen of favourites and the babbling of the confessor Diego de Chaves. Everywhere famine, corruption, terror. Gone the manly pride which had engendered such rare prowess, such intrepid adventures. To-day honesty was a crime; the *fuero*, sedition; dignity, rebellion. The rewards and honours which had formerly attended the great deeds of *caballeros*, fell to-day to any knave with a purse full of ducats.

“Is it just,” he would ask, “that the king should raise funds by selling titles of nobility as though they were goods put up for public auction, or by overwhelming

¹ Privilege granted to a province.

the aristocracy with taxes, transforming it into a collection of knaves and parvenus? And the result of it all is that our hold upon Flanders grows daily more precarious, that the French, whom we had by the ears, are again provoking us, and that the English are laying waste our coasts with fire and sword, at their own sweet will. Once we owned the riches of the world, and now we are beggars. A great deal of soldierly display—and, beneath it, plague and famine. Many fine feathers in our hats—which we must doff at every door to beg a crust of bread. For many years now the Cortes has voiced the unanimous protests of the kingdom—and it is ignored. We shall soon see whither such contemptuous treatment leads."

He spoke standing, his rapier pressed tightly under his arm. At times his voice grew husky, and then he would go up to one of the braziers and spit upon the coals. His great friend Don Enrique Dávila, Señor de Navamorcunde and Villatoro, hung with rapt attention upon every word he uttered, his eyes bright with excitement. He usually concluded by leaving his seat and, as though under a spell, would stand within a few paces of Bracamonte. Some among the audience became infected with the contagion of revolt. Marcos López, the parish priest of San Tomé, assured them that one night St. James the Apostle had appeared to him in order to tell him that if the Castilian nobility did not take up arms in defence of its privileges Spain was irretrievably lost. Doctor Valdivieso, and Daza Zimbrón, the lawyer, encouraged Bracamonte with enthusiastic shouts, while Hernán de Guillamas, who had represented Ávila in the Cortes of Madrid, cited with patriotic anguish, in support of Don Diego, the scorn which the king had poured upon the unanimous expostulations of the whole kingdom.

The others, especially the churchmen, lowered their eyes and reduced their countenances to a state of immobility. Upon the slightest interruption there was always

someone ready to introduce another topic. Any futility was well received, provided that it served to dissipate the uneasiness excited by the fiery words of Bracamonte, who touched upon the gravest questions as who should strike the ancient tapestries with a lighted torch.

It was then that Gaspar Vela Nuñez, or Gonzalo de Ahumada, recently arrived from Peru, would discuss American affairs: telling of fabulous animals and fruits, wretched younger sons suddenly enriched by the discovery of buried treasure, ancient tombs crammed with precious stones, tremendous victories in which your fingers grew sticky with blood so that you were obliged to bind string round your sword or pike that it might not slip from your hand. Such tales went to the heads of those sons of Castile, accustomed to adorn the most barren horizon with the mirages of adventure and romance. Some half closed their eyes in order to picture more vividly those distant lands where wealth came on a sudden without recourse to the degrading drudgery of merchants, envisaging impossible countries in which the foot jogged at every step against a vein of gold.

Those who had returned from Italy brought with them presents and letters, together with the latest news of the Turks. Those who had been soldiers in Flanders, such as Antonio Dávila, "the Warty," or Pedro Rengifo, the man with the scar upon his forehead, discussed the tactics of Farnese and told innumerable tales of Spanish heroism.

The imperial vigour of their race shone in their eyes, making an ecstatic harmony of pride. These warriors, the soles of whose boots were encrusted with the dry mud of the most diverse countries, were, according to the blazonings of Ferdinand and Isabella, the sheaf of arrows and the yoke of the world. Some, here and there, were discussing the signs of decadence, but the majority were more concerned with the colour of their plumes or the jingling of their spurs.

Upon other occasions, it was the turn of the theolo-

gians. Their rivalries, if hidden, were none the less profound. After engaging with scholastic skill in the inevitable dispute, they concluded by answering one another in a learned and venomous Latin which embittered the assembly.

The rooms resounded, like hives, with an incessant buzzing; the atmosphere was hot and oppressive. Neither the perfumed gloves nor the smoke from the censers succeeded in drowning the sweaty odour of dirty sack-cloth which emanated from the monks. The shutters were usually closed at three in the afternoon. The iron bars of the braziers glowed red in the shadow, but the long file of servants entered immediately, bringing in their train an aurora of light which illuminated the pale features, the whiteness of the ruffs, the yellow habits of the Dominicans, striking sparks from the insignia of military orders and the precious stones upon the velvets and brocades.

Nearly all these men were lean and meagre. Ambition or penance, frequently assisted by prolix and rebellious tertiaries, had withered the flesh upon their bones, and graved upon their countenances the deep furrows of jaundice; countenances at once haughty and sad, countenances upon which bravado was wont to conceal secret fears, and in whose eyes, continually raised to heaven, there seemed to glow a mystic, visionary light.

XXII

THE murky light which penetrated the clouds scarcely sufficed to illuminate the pages of the book. Ramiro was reading for the third time a passage from *The Vanity of the World*:

If we were to picture the earth as situated in the starry heavens, and if God were to make it bright and shining as one of the stars, we could not, on account of its smallness,

distinguish it from here below. And if, as compared with the firmament, the earth is the merest dot, how much smaller will be the tiniest speck in relation to the empyrean? In despising the world, therefore, granted that we are its masters, what are we casting aside save a wretched anthill, in exchange for the vast and royal palaces of heaven?

These words of Friar Diego de Estella flashed across his spirit like a ray of light. Marking the page, and leaning over the arm of the chair, he gazed pensively out of the old window, whose panes were held in their places by a thick network of lead. Heavy clouds, which obscured the sky far away towards the east, appeared above the ramparts. Although seated by a lighted brazier, Ramiro felt through every crevice that glacial tremor in the air which heralds a coming snowstorm.

The stones of the streets and the tiles of the palace took on a livid, frozen hue. The wind moaned outside. It was one of those wintry days upon which the soul withdraws into itself in a domestic aloofness and the whole being recoils upon its own egoism. What magic then informs the four walls of the room, within which a continual reverie has imparted to all familiar objects an indefinable friendliness, a portion of our own spirit! The bolt utters as it falls a harsh yet reassuring cry and the fire beckons to us with that ardent fascination which charms away all care and detaches us from all the troubles of the world. The atmosphere was pregnant with a tremendous hostility. The sky frowned, the air breathed malignity, filled, perhaps, with evil spirits! The gloomy stories which, as a child, he had heard away up there in the tower, came once more into his mind. At times a little whirlwind of dust and splinters around some chimney would fill his soul with a strange unrest. It seemed as though all things were pale and dumb with terror, the tiles, the closed window, the trees in the *patios*.

Some peasants were hastily descending the hill in the direction of the Gate of Don Antonio Vela, spurring on their mules and donkeys. Ramiro divined that over towards the south-east, behind the *sierras*, a

tempest lay in ambush, ready to hurl itself upon the valley, tearing off the roofs of barns and uprooting the trees.

How delightful to sit idly here by the fire! He dreamed of the peace of monasteries, the delights of a hermit's cell on winter days and nights, the delicious somnolence of prayers in gloomy choirs, redolent with the solemn odour of old varnish, wax and incense. The brutal disillusion which he had suffered a few days ago when he attended the reunion had filled his heart with hatred and rancour towards all men.

"About the question of money!" he repeated from time to time, recalling the words of the monk. "Who, save his rival, could have devised such an accusation? Must he, Ramiro, also pardon *him* with the heroic clemency of a saint?"

Doña Guiomar's words: "You will be fortunate indeed if they do not tarnish the splendour of your deed by means of some calumny," now seemed to him prophetic.

But why torment oneself if, in this world, honour was at the mercy of any treacherous tongue? And even were it not so: of what avail the glory and power of the world, if this "anthill," as the inspired priest had called it, was no more, perchance, than a house of cards which the fire of death would ultimately destroy? Of what value a man's life upon this earth? Any fragile trinket endured longer than its owner. Perchance other gallants would twirl their moustaches before his mirror when he was no more than a mass of corruption. The Venetian goblet passed from father to son, more enduring than the proud hands which had at banquets raised it to their lips.

What was one to think? What was one to do? He himself was astounded at these wild flights of fancy.

He looked out again into the street. An hour passed by. It was a Sunday, towards the end of February. The cathedral bell had just tolled for the third time. The usual guests were arriving; some, enveloped in cloaks

lined with marten's fur, came in their sedan-chairs, others on foot, completely muffled up in their *ferreuelos*,¹ or their rain-cloaks. Their breath escaped through a single aperture, like a cloud of smoke. The priests drew their long gowns closely about them; the Dominicans, their mantles; the Franciscans and Carmelites pulled their pointed hoods down over their faces and folded their arms beneath their cloaks. Ramiro saw Vargas Orozco arrive, his nose purple with the cold; his page was holding up the ample train of his robe. He thought he could recognise Don Pedro Valderrábano by his fur-trimmed shoes and his yellow-satin stockings. Four *valentones*² guarded the chair of Don Enrique Dávila, three of them armed with halberd and buckler, the other bearing a magnificent cross-bow inlaid with ivory.

Ramiro, who did not wish to go into the drawing-room, reopened *The Vanity of the World*. At that moment, after announcing herself with the customary knock, Casilda entered the room. Her eyelids trembled strangely. She approached the bureau, removed the box of seals, trimmed the wicks of the lamp, smoothed out the bed-clothes. She handled everything with a timid, bashful air, as though she wished to disclose or demand something and was unable to summon up the courage to do so.

"Are you looking for anything?" the youth asked her.

"Nothing, sire; but my father sent for me, and I am making sure that everything is ready for the night."

The idea of rewarding with some present the unceasing care with which the girl had tended him during the long days of his illness, now entered his mind for the first time.

"Open the left-hand drawer of that little desk. Do you see a green purse? Well then, bring it to me." He took out three ducats and offered them to her, exclaiming: "Take these for pocket-money, Casilda."

As she felt the coldness of the coins upon her palm,

¹ Capes without hoods.

² Hired bullies.

she let them fall upon the table, as though she had touched some loathsome reptile. She blushed with shame, and, with heaving breast, let fall a sigh. Then she smiled sadly, saying:

“What—your grace thought . . . No, no—for God’s sake, no!”

“So scrupulous, my girl? Cannot I be allowed to make you a little present?”

“No, sire, I thank you. I came for a very different reason. I want to tell your grace,” she added, hesitating for an instant and lowering her voice, “of something which is going on in this house.”

“Ah! yes, that the lackey, the servant, the duenna . . . You can tell me all about that some other time.”

“It is not that, sire. It is a rather serious matter. An affair—how can I say it?—a *very* serious matter. For, simple as I am, I can well see that justice will soon come upon this house and that your grace may suffer some grave injury.”

“Well; explain what you mean, quickly. What is taking place?”

Casilda trembled, as though deeply affected by his imperious tones. She then replied:

“This, sire. Many of the gentlemen who come here meet together secretly in a room next to the one in which I keep my chest. They light tapers, speak against the king, and talk of rising in rebellion.”

“From whom did you learn all this?”

“I heard it myself last Sunday night, when I went into the room to look for a dress.”

“Tell me everything—and make haste.”

“As I went in, I heard voices which seemed to come from the cupboard in the wall. But as I am not afraid of ghosts, I opened it to find out what they were. It was empty—but the voices could still be heard, as though in the same room. They were next door, and they said what I have already told you, sire. So far as I can see, there must be many gentlemen—and

among them is the priest of San Tomé, with his cold, and the Señor de Bracamonte, with his hoarse voice, and . . .”

A rap upon the door which communicated with the gallery cut her story short.

“Who’s there?” asked Ramiro.

“It is I,” replied Vargas Orozco, opening the door and entering the room. Then, after casting a sidelong glance at Casilda, he approached Ramiro and, without seating himself, asked:

“They have told you?”

“What?”

“What is taking place in this house?”

“To what does your grace refer?”

“To the secret meetings of Don Diego and the rest, in the room on the ground floor, to which they are conducted by the majordomo.” Then, raising his voice, and pointing towards the neighbouring rooms: “To the frightful treachery of those villains.”

“For God’s sake, your grace, do not speak so loudly, they can hear you,” Ramiro broke in; adding: “So that your grace has also heard about it from . . .”

“From this girl,” answered the Canon, pointing to Casilda.

A lively conversation ensued, and it was agreed that before the conclusion of the meeting they would both hide themselves in the room which Casilda had mentioned, in order to clear the matter up and ascertain the truth. At first, the youth expressed a lively dislike for such espionage, declaring that it seemed to him fairer to go direct to Don Enrique Dávila or to Bracamonte himself. The Canon, however, insisted upon the necessity of a preliminary certitude; and in speaking of the danger to Ramiro’s wound, which might reopen as they descended the staircase, he added:

“If that should happen, my son, bear in mind that you will have again suffered in the service of the king and for the honour of your house.”

One by one they went down into the drawing-room. Already Don Iñigo was surrounded by a large number of guests. Don Pedro de Valderrábano, a crafty old hidalgo, was pacing to and fro alone, casting his eye mechanically over the furniture and the figures on the tapestry. Other gentlemen were engaged in conversation by the windows, through which an opaque, livid light entered the room. Ramiro, after the customary formal interchange of greetings, seated himself beside a large brazier, around which a group of guests were discussing the war.

Don Enrique Dávila was criticising the tactics of Farnese, holding in his right hand a silver cup, the rim of which was adorned with a bezoar-stone. A servant was replenishing it, somewhat too frequently, with San Martín wine. Don Enrique was richly dressed in purple velvet, with a vest of like material, lined with fur. His impetuous character was well suited to a man of his gigantic stature. When he desired to drown some great sorrow, he would exhaust several horses in frenzied gallops along the road to Villatoro. Gambling was his only passion. His hair, unparted, was brushed straight back from his forehead. His skin was faded and muddy in appearance, his eyes small. Ramiro heard only the concluding words of his speech:

“Your grace should rather say that once he had left the provinces in order to march into France, Farnese should have launched an attack against the Béarnais, routed him without delay, captured his stores, taken Paris, and then said to our king, ‘Let your majesty now decide who shall occupy this throne.’ Thus, although exposing Flanders to attack, we should have augmented the power of our arms and purged that kingdom of the Lutheran plague.”

“A fine way, indeed, to make war,” said Don Pedro de Valderrábano, in a tone of friendly mockery. “In a trice your grace has routed an army, seized its provender, taken a mighty city by surprise and captured it. Bear

in mind, Don Enrique, that there is no battle which cannot be won in an armchair, by the fireside!"

The magistrate, Gaspar González Heredia, desiring to take the sting out of this raillery, turned to Don Enrique and added seriously: "Perchance the duke's army was scarcely large enough for so ambitious an enterprise, and some would have the Béarnais to be a man of great valour and military skill, who himself fights at the head of his army."

"But that," replied Daza Zimbrón, the lawyer, who prided himself upon his knowledge of tactics, "would hardly stand as evidence of that great skill to which your grace has referred; for the head of a great kingdom—and such the Béarnais would like to become—if he has to engage in battle should not mingle with his troops in the conflict for, if he himself were killed or captured, the kingdom would be irretrievably lost—as happened in the case of the Medes and Persians, conquered by Alexander after the death of Rodrigo, and in that of Hungary, in our own day, after the death of King Lewis, in the battle which he so rashly fought against the Turks."

A murmur of approval greeted these words.

"Have you received any new letters from France, father?" remarked Don Alonso to Father Jaime Rodríguez, of the Society of Jesus.

"Nearly all of them are lost on the way. This month only one has reached us. It contained a few details concerning the first attack made upon Paris by the Béarnais, last December."

"Let us hear them."

"It seems that the Béarnais approached the city after nightfall, when all the citizens were asleep; but by some strange chance, in which the hand of God can clearly be discerned, the heretics propped their ladders against the Papal Gate, where some monks of our Society happened to be standing. When the first assailants appeared above the gate, our brothers began to raise the alarm.

The inhabitants then awoke, the tocsin was sounded, and the heretics retired in confusion."

"A great honour for our Order," someone remarked.

"A lucky accident indeed," put in Father Rodríguez.

Then the Dominican, Friar Gonzalo Jiménez, Keeper of the Monastery of St. Thomas and Censor of the Holy Office, observed with feigned meekness:

"From now onwards you will have a motto to inscribe above the doors of your houses."

"And what will it be, according to your reverence?"

"*Anseres Capitolini*—the famous geese of the Capitol; and no longer will anyone be able to assert that you have no ancestors."

Everyone was well aware of the enmity which existed between the two Orders. No one, however, had anticipated so gross an insult. The reply of Father Rodríguez: "And even they will not be humble enough for us," passed unheard in the murmur of surprise. Then various groups were formed for conversation; but one predominated, which was finally joined by all. The chaplain of the Hospitallers of the Annunciation, Miguel González Vaquero, was conversing with the Dominican, Chrysostom del Pero, upon the subject of the miracles which Doña María Vela, a nun of Santa Ana, was alleged to have performed. The chaplain enjoyed a reputation for sanctity. The ashen pallor of his face betrayed the practice of terrible austerities, and his large, liquid eyes shone with an affecting meekness.

"The privileges which God has granted her," he was saying, "are so great, and her words are so full of divine love that doubt is impossible."

"Tell me what you will concerning her humility and other virtues, sir chaplain, but as for her revelations, in them I am less inclined to believe."

"I once heard you, father, say exactly the same of Mother Teresa de Jesús."

"In truth, I have often said: let us wait and see what will become of this nun, for it is imprudent to put faith

in her revelations so hastily; not so much because I suspect her, as that I deem it wise to proceed cautiously where women are concerned. But I now declare that the said Teresa has proved that it is possible for evangelical perfection to dwell within them."

"And it is so in the case of Doña María, Father Chrysostom. I have had a sufficiently long experience of her charity and of her prayers to decide whether or no we have to do with one of Satan's tricks."

"They tell me that it was your grace," remarked Zimbrón, the lawyer, addressing the chaplain, "who advised that she should be given the Holy Viaticum in order to loosen her jaws."

"No, no, 'twas Father Julian—Father Julian."

"Did your grace witness the miracle?"

"When I entered the cell, Doña María was already opening her lips to receive the divine remedy—her whole face lit up like a torch. For more than nine days her jaws were pressed so tightly together that the strongest man could not open them to insert even the tiniest drop."

The conversation, following its customary course, touched upon the astounding miracles which were continually being performed in the city. Another nun of Santa Ana heard, every night, a voice which revealed to her the ambushes laid by the Demon around the cells of certain sisters. In the Convent of St. Joseph, Catherine Dávila, seized with a sudden ecstasy as she was perusing a manuscript note by St. Teresa de Jesús in the *Morals* of St. Gregory, had been raised several inches from the ground. Sister Angela of the Incarnation was, before the eyes of all her companions, buffeted and half strangled by Satan, who at length hurled her from a high gallery into the convent garden. She suffered no injury. Also, every Monday, the day which Jesus spent upon the Mount of Olives, she, simulating the Passion of Our Saviour, sweated so much blood through every pore of her body that she was obliged to change her tunic twice or thrice in the course of the day.

As they spoke of these things, their voices trembled strangely and the sternest countenances relaxed and grew pale, as though fanned by some sacred zephyr. The whole city, redolent with the odour of sanctity, seemed to be borne aloft to some heavenly region and to float as by a miracle among an almost invisible host of angels. Their souls burned like the perfumed coals of some mystic brazier, stirred by penitence, fanned incessantly by the beating of the wings of prayer. Miracles were omnipresent. They perched themselves here and there like marvellous tame birds. They were spoken of joyfully, but without astonishment.

The name of Teresa de Jesús, the nun-errant, the snatcher of souls, the sublime rogue, was frequently mentioned in these conversations. Many of those who met there were related to her, some had chatted and joked with her in the locutories of the Incarnation and St. Joseph; others, the elder ones, had known her as a girl, when she liked fine clothes and perfumes, and enjoyed giving nicknames to the gallants. They spoke of her miracles with the same enthusiasm as they quoted her witty sayings, and all took a delight in talking calmly of a being whom the eyes of the soul could now discern in celestial glory.

“They did us a great wrong when they robbed us of the precious relic of her body,” said Alonso de Valdivieso, as he concluded the story of a pleasant meeting with her at Medina del Campo.

“The Duke of Alva is responsible for that piece of knavery,” replied the Señor de Navamorcuende.

Then, taking advantage of the loud murmur provoked by Don Enrique’s words, a Carmelite friar remarked to Ramiro in a low voice that, not long ago, fearing that, unexpectedly, they might again remove the miraculous body, a lay sister of the Convent of Alba de Tormes had gone, one stormy night, to the sepulchre of Mother Teresa, and, exposing the body, had cut open the breast with a knife, plunged her hand into the wound and torn

out the heart. Then that superhuman woman had put the relic between two wooden platters and carried it into her cell. On the following day, the extraordinary fragrance which embalmed the cloisters had disclosed the sublime sacrilege.

Fevered by the confused hum of conversation and the close, sultry atmosphere of the room, Ramiro was forced to collect his thoughts, feeling himself moved to the depths of his being by the passion which informed these last narrations. He had just learned anew that at the first mention of the miracles worked by a humble nun, all other themes lost their interest, and that even the sternest hidalgos, with all their pride of race, of possessions, of honourable wounds, bowed their heads as though dwarfed and belittled by the sublimity of glory penitent.

And once again the strange, calm voice which was wont to whisper to him out of the depths of his conscience, spoke to him now in these words: "Draw apart from the fury of human strife. There is no life more heroic, more vigorous, more truly life than that of him who, casting aside for ever the pomps and vanities of the world, follows in the footsteps of Christ our Saviour. Such a man, like no other, augments the powers of his spirit and, in the course of a single day, he besieges and defends, takes castles, erects gabions and palisades, wages fierce battles, puts immense legions to flight, conquers unknown, marvellous worlds. He alone can wing his way through the vast halls of eternity, he alone reaps a harvest who knows true glory and overcomes the vanity, the fleetingness, the pain of things terrene."

Yes, he would become a monk, and perhaps a hermit. He had made up his mind. With drooping eyelids he dreamed, amid the growing murmur of the assembly, of his future sanctity.

The sound of shouting in the street, a harsh, discordant clamour which shook the window panes, broke in upon his dream.

"What is the matter?" some exclaimed.

Ramiro, who was near one of the windows, rose to his feet, opened the shutters and looked out. A group of peasants was crossing the *plazuela* in the direction of the palace. By the smoky light of the torches, he could distinguish, in the midst of the crowd, the tall figure of Bracamonte. A fresh uproar broke out:

“Long live Don Diego!” Their steps resounded upon the tiles in a solemn cadence.

“It is some neighbours who are accompanying Don Diego de Bracamonte,” exclaimed Ramiro in a loud voice, turning again towards the assembled guests.

“It seems,” said Valderrábano, “that for some days past, so soon as they set eyes upon him in the street they start to follow him and cheer him on continually with their hurrahs, of which the odour is even more insufferable than the din.”

“God grant they do not force him into some excess,” added the Canon gravely.

Ramiro noticed that the glances of some were solemn, while some scrutinised one another’s faces narrowly. Meanwhile, Don Enrique Dávila answered the Canon with an insulting laugh, fingering the jewel which hung upon his chain.

“‘Avoid all strife and quarrelling,’ Don Enrique,” quoted the Canon.

“Sir Canon, ‘Once begun, must be done,’ ” replied the Señor de Navamorcunde, completing the well-known motto inscribed upon his family crest.

A few minutes later Bracamonte entered the room.

“What news?” Don Enrique asked him, rising from his seat. While a lackey removed his snow-sprinkled cloak from his shoulders, Bracamonte replied:

“It appears that the intervention of the Holy Office has been sought in the trial of Antonio Pérez. Thus do they make a mock of the ancient privileges of Aragón.” From behind a candelabrum, his face aglow in the light of innumerable candles, the Keeper of Santo Tómas interjected:

“ Is there, perchance, any privilege more worthy of the name than that of the Holy Inquisition? Let them argue it out there, Señor Don Diego, for here we are in Castile.”

Bracamonte, who recognised the voice immediately, replied without hesitation:

“ Your grace is already aware that, according to the ancients, tyranny is a slope down which one can slide only too easily. If they dare to act thus towards Aragón, which until now has so zealously preserved its liberty, what will they not dare to do to us, who are already plucked and ready for the saucepan? ”

Ramiro felt a touch upon his arm.

“ Let us go now—it is time,” the Canon whispered in his ear.

A few guests retired, Don Alonso among them.

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When master and pupil, conducted by Casilda, entered the room on the ground floor, night had already fallen.

“ It is snowing,” said the girl, looking out into the *patio*.

Casilda had not been dreaming; nor had she lied. After a long interval, they began to hear through the boards of the recess hollowed out in the dividing wall the sound of people entering the next room. There was not a single crack through which they could peep; but Ramiro and the Canon easily recognised those present, even though all lowered their voices cautiously.

“ The new letters,” said Bracamonte, “ are from the Baron of Bárboles, Miguel de Gurrea, and the Seigneur de Purroy.”

He read them out. The last two told of the recent events in Aragón, and the popular rising at Saragossa. That of Don Diego de Heredia, Baron of Bárboles, said, among other things: “ To-day it is we, the Aragonese, who are threatened; to-morrow it may be you. Lend us your loyal help, O brothers of Castile; for our country is in danger; since those who should be its fathers and

its judges have become its wicked stepfathers and calumniators."

"Yes, the state is in danger," Bracamonte added brusquely, imprudently raising his voice. "And can we wonder at it, when Spain, governed of old by her most illustrious citizens, is to-day the prey of greedy upstarts who not only seek by every means in their power to increase their private fortunes at the expense of the public weal, but endeavour also to impoverish and ruin the most ancient nobility in the kingdom, refusing it, as we all know, all share in governance and devising for it every day fresh impositions, fresh limitations. If the punctilious honour of our caste had not already degenerated into servile cowardice, who would dare to treat us with such effrontery? Come—let us prove the worth of that pure blood which we derive from our ancestors. The time is ripe for resolute action. Let us, if necessary, lose our lives in this attempt rather than sacrifice our honour. Aragón only awaits a sign from us to rise in rebellion: Seville is burning with impatience: Valladolid, Madrid and Toledo will follow in our train almost before we start to march."

A fervent chorus of approbation greeted Bracamonte's speech. Then, in the silence which intervened, a single voice rang out, stern and arresting:

"Let it not be said that old age in sapping my strength has also drained the blood from my heart. Be it known that my whole fortune is, from to-day, at the disposal of this cause. And if circumstances demand it, I will have myself carried up to the ramparts in my chair, for my hand can still hold a javelin."

As they heard that voice, the Canon and Ramiro sought one another's eyes in the darkness.

"God help us! Don Iñigo!" exclaimed the Canon, seizing his pupil by the arm.

"Yes, it is he," said the youth simply.

Then the sound of exclamations and broken sentences made itself heard.

"He is a tyrant," said someone distinctly.

"His confessor," added the priest of San Tomé, "will certainly burn in hell for granting him absolution."

Others shouted: "Let the notice which we shall place upon the walls be read out aloud."

"It is too late."

"Let it be read, and then we will retire."

They then distinctly heard the rustling of papers, and Don Enrique Dávila read the historic pasquinade:

"If any nation in the world ever deserved, for many reasons, to be favoured, respected and granted liberty, by its lord and king, it is assuredly ours; but the cupidity and tyranny of our times will not permit the consideration of such treatment. Oh! Spain, Spain, how well are recognised thy services, empurpled by so much noble and plebeian blood, for in recompense the king attempts to class the nobility with upstarts and felons! Stand by thy rights and defend thy liberties, for in so just a cause it will be indeed an easy task; and then, Philip, content thyself with what is thine and lay not thine hands upon that which belongs by right to others, neither give occasion to those from whom thou derivest the honour which is thine, that they shall be compelled to defend their own which has been so long and zealously guarded, and by the laws of this kingdom defended."

The subdued cheering which broke out in the next room indicated to the Canon and Ramiro that the conspirators were numerous.

"Well said, well said, Señor Don Enrique," cried some.

"Let it be fastened to-morrow morning upon the walls of the cathedral, and upon the porches of the market-place."

"Let Don Enrique and Don Diego choose the place and time, for, when the occasion arises, we are all ready to affix it with our own hands upon the most fitting spot."

A creaking of chairs was heard. They were all rising to go out.

XXIII

So soon as the Canon found himself once again in his pupil's room, he cried out in a prophetic voice:

“They will all end upon the scaffold.”

Ramiro, dropping into a chair by the little table, already laid for dinner, stared blankly at the tablecloth which gleamed white in the light of the candelabra. After a long silence, he replied:

“Even though it be so, we must join them. They are honourable and gallant gentlemen. I must show,” he added, raising his face towards the light and striking the table with his clenched fist, “that the nobility of Castile is not yet without hearts capable of old-time valour.”

“By the sacred habit I am wearing,” cried the Canon, “I am driven to think that some host of invisible demons has entered this house and turned the heads of all who frequent it. Cannot you see, my son, that this insane adventurer Don Enrique and this wild beast Bracamonte are merely vomiting up in the form of words their intense malignity, their resentment because they have never merited one single distinction during the whole course of their lives? And is it not also clear to you that, so soon as the treacherous pasquinade which they read over is displayed, they will both be decapitated by the public executioner, together with the few rash fools who took it into their heads to join them? If it pleases you, Ramiro, to share their end upon the odious scaffold in the market-place, or to spend the rest of your days in some galley as an oarsman under the boatswain's whip—well, do as you suggest! Then you will figure in the Chronicles as the base descendant who ignominiously tarnished the honour of his ancient and noble house by a deed of shame and infamy.”

“Am I, perchance, a child or a woman to leave to

others the task of preserving our ancient rights? My great-grandfather, Suero del Águila, risked his life for them."

"Woe is me," replied the Canon, "if I have nourished a viper in my bosom. Is it not pride—good God!—detestable pride, the cause of so much guilt and transgression, which prompts you to rant in this fashion?"

Then, after striding once or twice up and down the room, he began to speak in the grandiose tones and with the large, rhetorical gestures which he affected upon certain occasions.

"Where is the tyrant? Where the injustice? How long will you continue thus to try the royal patience? Who but a liar and a madman can say that the country is in danger? Has there ever been, throughout the ages, a nation so greatly feared and envied as Spain is to-day? We are the masters of the world by land and sea; we have all the countries of the earth by the ears. Our *tercios* in Flanders and Italy have paled the glory of the Macedonian phalanx and the Roman cohorts. The peoples of the world tremble at the sound of Spanish spurs. Fools! was there ever a monarch so great and yet so just as Philip? I am confident that in time to come it will be necessary, in order to give an adequate idea of his life, to unite the piety of a David with the wisdom of a Solomon, the triumphs of an Alexander with the prudence of a Marcus Aurelius. And how can you forget what he has done and is doing every day to uproot heresy from the earth? And yet there are still malcontents in Spain! there are still bad vassals who seek a way to hinder the cause of this prince anointed of the Lord! Do these greedy knaves imagine that such greatness is unworthy of the name because a single thread is taken from their cloaks?"

He went on in this strain, pacing the room the while. Ramiro listened to him attentively, fascinated by the unexpected warmth of this indictment, which, although it contradicted everything which Bracamonte had

vociferated in his speeches, threw him, nevertheless, into a state of proud and heroic exaltation.

A servant brought in the first dish. The Canon seated himself, and scarcely had he raised a large mouthful of ham to his lips when he saw Ramiro's mother enter the room. She seemed more animated than usual, speaking cheerfully and venturing upon one or two mystic pleasantries as she begged her son not to keep the Lord waiting too long, but so soon as he felt strong enough, to mount his horse and set off upon the road to Salamanca.

"It is now your grace's turn, Sir Canon, to give this soul the prodding of which it stands in need," she added with an unwonted smile, as she left the room.

When they were again alone, the youth, rendered dumb by the tumultuous emotions that jostled one another within his soul, rose nervously to his feet and going towards the window opened the shutters. Ávila, clad in a mantle of snow, glistened like some enchanted city beneath the magic splendour of the moon.

Ramiro ordered the lackey to remove the candles. The corners of the room grew shadowy; but at the same time the starlight, filtering in through the dusty panes, seemed to hang suspended in the air like a fantastic, ghostly veil. Ramiro gazed in admiration at the curious cloak of ermine in which the roofs and turrets were decked on that translucent night; and his thoughts wandered to heavenly things, to the clear harmonies of Paradise, to the soul of Teresa de Jesús, rejoicing in God amid the infinite whiteness of the seraphim.

"Do you know what I think, Ramiro?" exclaimed the Canon suddenly, his body invisible in the darkness. "I think that your good mother has just spoken to us with the tongue of angels, as the saying goes, and that now, more than ever before, in the presence of the approaching danger to your soul, and to your honour, you should, without delay, seek refuge in the arms of

Holy Church. She alone can calm those burning tempests of the brain, and save you from falling into the sin of pride, into that dangerous and detestable sin which makes of you a luscious fruit for the Demon. If God so wills it, my son, I shall soon be promoted to the bishopric of Cartagena or Orense, so Don Alonso assures me. Remote from all spite and envy, my name will soon be known throughout Spain. My wisdom will spout forth from the cave of the Chapter like a generous, forgotten wine, and everywhere it will influence the souls of men. My counsel will be sought on every occasion by the court, and the king himself will say at length, 'His Eminence Lorenzo Vargas Orozco is of this opinion—the last word has been said.' Then, Ramiro, my first thought will be to summon you to my side, and from that time the true glory which Heaven preserves for you will begin. At last I see it all. In that way, in that way. . . . May God grant it thus!"

Ramiro relapsed into meditation. Seated now in the chair by the window, he gazed up into the sky, his face like a piece of clear, carved ivory. At last, leaning towards his master, without lowering his eyes, he replied in a hesitating, almost sorrowful tone:

"At times, I too think that God wills it as you have said, and that He has revealed His will, now by snatching me from the arms of death, now laying bare to me the vileness of the world and the vanity of all human glory, or speaking to me in my mother's supplications, as He has just spoken now. Then all my spirit cries out to the Divine Majesty, pleading for one of those mercies which He daily grants to some souls, and which reveal in one instant His predilection. But He makes no answer, and my whole being is forced in its disillusion to withdraw its ardour once again into the gloomy depths. I should like," he cried, stretching out his arms to the blue splendour of the moonlight in which his hands gleamed strangely, "I should like to be caught up in one moment of ecstasy into the realms of eternal joy described by

Santa Teresa de Jesús, to rejoice, if only for one instant, in that rapture, that ravishment into which she fell continually, to mount, with one supreme effort, on the wings of my soul, to the abode of God, there to annihilate myself, to lose myself utterly, in the contemplation of His majesty!"

He paused for an instant, and then went on:

"Oh! that at least I might be granted a miracle, an indisputable miracle by means of which the Lord would show that in me He was well pleased: that I could be raised from the ground during my prayers, that I might see upon my body the stigmata of the Passion, hear one word from the lips of one of those images of Our Lady, which have worked so many wonders in this city for the benefit of humble peasants and villagers; or receive from on high some message which I had to transmit to mankind; but, so far, nothing! My body is like a sack of pebbles, my hands are smooth, my flesh unbroken as ever, and Heaven for me is closed in silence. As for the images of Our Lady of the Cows, and of the Cavern, when I gaze and gaze at them they flicker and tremble as though I were looking at them through the flame of a candle; but as for speaking to me, never! And oh! how gloomy are my thoughts, how dark my mind, how dry and shrivelled my heart! Ah!" He raised his hands to his breast.

"You are indeed in grave danger, my son! Now I begin to see—and in the one in whom I should have least desired to see it—the evil which the accounts of miracles can work in souls as yet unripened by experience and study, depriving them of all humility and awakening within them super-human aspirations, to the great delight of the Devil. This Teresa, and all those who have written or are writing in the vulgar tongue upon the subject of mysticism, are doing Spain a great evil, exciting contempt for the strait and narrow way of scholasticism and whetting the desire of the imprudent with tales of visions and

revelations, confabulations and ecstasies, and all the wild dreams experienced by contemplative intoxication. All these things, Ramiro, are but the smoke from the burning torch of truth, and those who seek only that smoke will soon be blinded by its fumes. Neither able nor willing to fathom the mysteries of Scripture and the hard teachings of the schools, they fondly hope that God will reveal Himself to them on a sudden, in one instant of ecstasy, that they may speak with Him face to face, as though He were a bailiff or a bishop. You are on the brink, Ramiro, of the most detestable heresy which now plagues Spain, and I greatly fear that, a prey to this spiritual gluttony, you will plunge, without knowing it, into the folly of the Beghards, or that someone will denounce you to the Holy Office as a visionary or a Quietist."

"I merely aspire to that which Mother Teresa of Jesus extols in her writings, she whom all hold to be a saint," exclaimed the youth timidly.

"And perchance," replied the Canon in his turn, "has not the example of the Nun of Piedrahita, the Sister Magdalene of the Cross, and the Prioress of Lisbon, proved a sufficient warning to inculcate in us all a prudent mistrust of all feminine revelations? Ah! daughters of Eve!" he cried, waving his arms in the shadow with a gesture which Ramiro was unable to distinguish.

Then, as though he had at last succeeded in suppressing the hateful thought, he went on:

"I have already told you on other occasions that this communion with God was customary and lawful under the ancient dispensation, and the Lord Himself counselled it—as we read in Isaiah, where He reproves the children of Israel, saying: '*Vae, filii desertores, dicit Dominus, ut faceretis concilium, et non ex me. . . . Qui ambulatis, ut descendatis in Aegyptum, et os meum non interrogastis.*' And we also read in Holy Scripture that Moses continually sought the counsel of the Lord, as did also David

and other kings of Israel; and God answered them, spoke with them, and was not angered, for the Faith was not yet established. But now, under the new law, all is consummated and the Faith founded *per saecula saeculorum*; there is no need, therefore, to seek God's counsel as heretofore, for in giving us, as He has given us, His Son, His Sovereign Word, He has spoken to us once and for all, and there is nought further for Him to declare. Hence, Ramiro, it follows that he who now questions God or implores from Him a revelation, importunes Him and angers Him. You would do better, then, to fasten the latchet of your shoes and absorb the Holy Scriptures and the writings of St. Thomas, for they are a solid aliment and all the rest but trivial dainties; they are a hard but a certain path; the rest a dangerous byway; they are the blessed light itself; the rest but pungent smoke which troubles sight and brain."

The gloom in which his face was hidden lent an added solemnity to his discourse. The emanation of pure reason was alone perceptible, and his thoughts seemed to glow more vividly in the darkness, like the red-hot coals of the brazier.

XXIV

Two days later, an unexpected event occurred. It was a little after one o'clock. Seated, as was his wont, by the window, Ramiro was idly turning over the leaves of the *Cordial*, the *Art of Good Dying*, the *Contemptus Mundi*. A leaden, melancholy light entered through the panes. The rustling of the pages alone disturbed the silence of the room. Suddenly an incomprehensible impulse, an indefinable murmur, compelled him to look out of the window. The street was gray and solitary, but a moment later, approaching from the south, two

lackeys appeared, clad in the blue and yellow livery of the Blázquez. Then came a tall squire in a scarlet cloak and travelling boots, and finally, in a sedan chair, Beatrice. Doña Álvarez, the duenna, walked behind, tapping upon the cobbles with her staff.

The girl sat in her chair with the imperious air of an Infanta. Her black veil concealed all except the border of her skirt, the dark blue velvet of which was striped with a triple band of silver. Ramiro rose to his feet. The incarnation of seductive womanhood was now passing before him, resplendent, terrible. The pallor of that face, stung by the icy wind, recalled the whiteness of the Host; and in very truth, it was the viaticum of his love, the viaticum of his dying, forgotten passion. As she passed by the window, Beatrice proffered a vague greeting, allowing an ironic smile to tremble upon her lips. A little farther on, as she was about to leave the *plazuela*, she raised her eyes towards that melancholy mask which was hidden, from time to time, behind the dull transparency of the panes, and smiled once more. Thus, her head nodding in unison with the gentle swaying of the chair, she, together with her suite, disappeared from sight.

Ramiro threw the *Art of Good Dying* upon a table now entirely covered with books.

The servant who came to waken him on the following morning was greatly perplexed. His master had gone to sleep the night before without removing his clothes.

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Long days dragged wearily by, days of confinement which he would endeavour to shorten by reading, or by painting, with an astounding dexterity, upon the walnut panels figures of Virgins and of saints. The Canon visited him frequently, and invariably urged him to adopt an ecclesiastical career. One day he said to him:

“The trial of the *moriscos* is about to commence. You will soon be called as a witness.”

As he was near the window, and was at that moment looking out into the street, he exclaimed:

“There goes Gonzalo de San Vicente. Assuredly the man who accompanies him is some fencing master. He is always in the society of such people. Some have it that the king wishes to appoint him *regidor*, in spite of his extreme youth, and that, if the appointment is made, Don Alonso Blázquez will bestow upon him the hand of his daughter Beatrice. His father, Don Philip, is a great gentleman, and a faithful servant of king and Church.”

Then, gazing at an almond tree of which the branches, already bursting into flower, could be seen behind an old tiled roof, he added:

“The libidinous season is approaching.”

Ramiro, meanwhile, was dying of ennui. His wound was not yet completely healed, and a tumour encircled the laggard cicatrice, which was ready to reopen upon the slightest provocation. The surgeon, after a learned discourse concerning the influence of the planets upon the crude and half-raw humours of gangrene, had concluded by informing him that he would not be able to go out until the end of March, and certainly not before he had been bled another dozen times or so, *ex carpo manus*; for, according to him, “there was still a corruption in the blood, a propitious postulant was present, a contrary postulant was absent. A fine state of affairs! What more could one ask?”

Holy Week arrived. The days took on once more a golden hue in the light of the year's first smile, and the trees unfolded their yellow buds, yellow and downy as ducklings. The city, now invaded by people from the surrounding districts, hummed and buzzed like some gigantic hive. On Wednesday morning, Ramiro saw his old rival, Gonzalo de San Vicente, crossing the *plazuela*, mounted upon a fine hack. The saddle was trimmed with blue velvet, upon which the family arms were embroidered in silk and gold thread. Two lackeys

preceded him. Doubtless he was going to ride past Beatrice's house or wait to see her as she came out from some church. A white plume, attached to his cap by a diamond brooch, fluttered in the morning breeze. Ramiro felt a desire to leap out on to the balcony and hurl some insult at this dandy, blonde as a foreigner, pink and white as a woman.

XXV

SCARCELY yet awake, her hair in disorder, her eyes dazzled by the light, stretching out first one arm, then the other, Beatrice, seated on the edge of her bed, allowed her slaves and serving-maids to dress her.

It was Holy Saturday, and in less than an hour the *Misa de Gloria* would begin in the cathedral. A clock had just struck nine.

It cost her a great deal to rise so early. The matutinal caress of the sheets enervated her will, causing her to dream of indefinable delights.

The chattering of Doña Álvarez, and the nude statuettes of bronze and marble which Don Alonso had brought back from Italy, had quickly sealed the doom of her innocence.

Leocadia, her favourite servant, after a repeated rubbing and kissing of her mistress's feet, was now drawing on her close-fitting, bronze-coloured stockings. The silk gleamed straight and white upon the sculptured perfection of her limbs. Then, when she had encased her feet in red, ambar-perfumed slippers, Leocadia gently raised her mistress's nightgown and kissed her, lingeringly, upon her naked flesh. The girl pushed her away with both hands, uttering an affected, coquettish cry of protest.

Leocadia then took out from a large chest another gown, adorned with lace, and presented it to the girl

upon a large tray. Then, unfolding that perfumed and beribboned offering, Beatrice drew the yellow curtains which hung from the canopy above her bed. Her legs, sturdier than her other limbs, could be seen through the aperture. Precious diamond brooches adorned her garters.

A warm fragrance, which emanated not from any casket of perfumes or box of pomades, but from the half-curtained bed and the lingerie of the previous day which lay discarded upon the stools, stole into the room.

In the dressing-room a servant was preparing the towels, the lavers and the ewers. Another made ready the dangerous white lead for the skin, and the little box of rouge which would give a slight touch of colour to the cheeks. Beatrice would scarcely allow them to wash her. At the touch of cold water she would stamp impatiently upon the floor with her cork-soled slippers. The servant would then draw the damp towel over her throat and shoulders with the lightness of a zephyr. She delighted, however, in perfumes. Was not that enough? Did not, perchance, the ambar, the *agua de angel*,¹ the civet, render her body as fragrant as a bouquet of flowers?

Two Italian slaves attended her, kneeling. The youngest knew how to enlarge her mistress's eyes with kohl, in the Turkish fashion. She wore enormous earrings and a green turban with yellow and purple stripes. She was blonde and languorous, like one of Sanzio's Virgins. Don Alonso had bought her from the captain of a galley; and when the hidalgo returned from court it was she who, every evening, brought to his bedside an aromatic sleeping draught.

Beatrice asked for her prayer-book, in order to meditate, in her own way, upon the mystery for the day, while they combed her straight hair whose blackness gleamed here and there with the purple sheen of rosewood.

¹ A perfume—"angel's water."

A cascade of sunbeams, leaping through the panes, fell obliquely into the room. This sparkling gift from Heaven caused the silver ornaments, the mother-of-pearl and metal of the inlaid work, the embroidery of the curtains, to gleam and glitter, breaking upon the carpet like the mythological shower of gold. Outside, the splendour of the morning gilded the summit of the façades and the cloudless sky withdrew its veil of mist.

They had handed Beatrice her book of hours half open. The picture represented Our Saviour's Ascension into Heaven, in His right hand a white banner, while the guards around the sepulchre threw themselves in terror upon the ground. She read with childish laboriousness the Epistle of St. Paul to the Colossians, following the lines with her forefinger. Then she read St. Matthew's story: Mary Magdalene and the other Mary on the way to the tomb, the stone rolled away, the glorious words of the angel announcing the Resurrection.

The story of that miracle of miracles moved her deeply. An inexpressible joy flooded her whole being at the thought of Jesus in His glorious Ascension after the agony of Calvary. She wanted to laugh, to sing; she wanted to don her richest gowns, to choose her finest jewels. Jesus was risen! She took her mirror in her hand and smiled into the glass, a broad smile which revealed her fine white teeth.

At length, clad in yellow brocade which, on account of its silver threads and scarlet embroidery, had the appearance of a chasuble, her hair carefully curled beneath her toque of plumes and velvet, her height increased by the cork heels of her shoes; covered with jewels like some miraculous virgin, adorned, padded, rustling, she began to pace about the room, gazing over her shoulder at the hem of the shot-silk *basquiña* and the wide folds of her skirt. In her tiny ears trembled the diamond pendants which had belonged to her great-grandmother. The servants ran after her as though she were an escaped dove. One tried to adjust the welt of her

shoes; another to tighten her belt of gold cloth sewn with tiny pearls. Leocadia, filling her mouth with scented water, squirted it through her teeth in a continuous jet and, walking round her mistress, sprinkled her skilfully from the hem of her skirt up to her starched ruff.

A slave entered to announce that the sedan chairs were ready in the anteroom.

“Let Álvarez be summoned,” exclaimed Beatrice. A moment later the duenna arrived, with a loud rattling of beads and rustling of corded silk flounces. The servants retired. Then Doña Álvarez, looking at the girl through her spectacles, cried:

“Precious little Infanta! Star of Bethlehem! God be praised, who made you dainty and graceful as a pearl from the ocean bed!”

Beatrice, meanwhile, was gazing at herself in the mirror, trying all kinds of expressions. Now she would half close her eyes, breathing like one about to swoon, as though she were inhaling some agonising perfume; now she would open them wide, and, pursing up her scarlet lips, seemed to offer them, like some candied strawberry, some alluring dainty, crimson and delicious, to an imaginary lover.

The duenna whispered into her ear:

“Has he passed along this street?”

“Of whom speakest thou?” replied the girl.

“Of Gonzalo.”

“How should I know?”

“Yes, he must have passed. I saw him enter the church several times. He was looking for you, like a hound which sniffs the covert.”

“Bah!”

“You will see him in his finest clothes. He rejoices the eyes with his steel-coloured habit and his thousands of little buttons and his brocades. And—glory be to God!—what fine plumes he wears! All the girls turn to look at him. What will he be like if they make him a

regidor, as I hear they are going to do? You seem both to have been born under the same lucky star! What a fine pair! He will be the opal and you the pearl, *señora mia!*”

“To what church hast thou been?”

“To the cathedral. They have already blessed the lights and the candles. I got a friend of mine, a canon, to give me some incense and some styrax. A fine ceremony! The church is more fragrant than an orchard. Let us make haste, or we shall be late.”

Taking the mirror from her hands, she threw a shawl over the girl’s shoulders and hastily brought her the muff of marten’s fur, into which Beatrice inserted both her little hands, affecting the airs of a great lady.

Once in the street, Don Alonso’s daughter leaned against the back of the chair in order to counteract its swaying, and at the measured step of the bearers she passed through the crowd, erect and resplendent as a holy image, her eyes uplifted, her lips piously closed. A lackey walked before her, bearing her *prie-dieu* upon which was richly embroidered the coat of arms of the Blázquez family.

XXVI

ÁVILA gleamed, like a small Jerusalem, in the liquid gold and white of the morning, fragrant with the odour of sanctity. The trees thrust their flowery branches over the summit of the walls, and spread them over the narrow streets. The silent belfries seemed to disseminate an impatient joy which pervaded the whole town. Beatrice imbibed this omnipresent sublimity, foreseeing the advent of some mysterious happening which would undermine the very foundations of her existence.

The people moved with difficulty about the streets, and the girl looked with infinite disgust at the peasants,

who diffused an odour of curds as they passed, and whose Sunday shoes creaked as they trod the cobbles. Some faces betrayed wonder and amazement at that remote event which the Church was celebrating, and their eyes started out of their heads with an astonishment such as St. John and St. Paul must have experienced on their way to the sepulchre.

When they arrived on the threshold of the cathedral, the steward was obliged to make way for the sedan chair through the crowd of rustics congregated there. In addition to the cottages and houses of the surrounding districts, many of the neighbouring villages had disgorged the greater part of their inhabitants on to this small square, scarcely large enough to accommodate the population of the city. The most diverse costumes glowed in the brilliant sunlight, a bustling, kaleidoscopic horde. One could distinguish petticoats of scarlet or green, like grains of pepper, or reddish in hue like pumpkins, or of a purple tint, like egg-plants, cloaks and buff jerkins the colour of potato skins, the black garments of the old men which had taken on the greenish hue of French beans, magnificent scarves and shawls over which the whole contents of the vegetable garden seemed to have been poured. The peasant girls of the eclogues, tightly corseted and with braided hair, village girls from Sotalvo, Tornadizos, Fontiveros, laundry girls or shepherdesses, who had not succeeded in ridding themselves of the odour of their washing or the stench of calves and lambs, were not wanting to complete the picture. Lean, taciturn men, closely shaven like monks, and wearing broad-brimmed hats, watched the noblemen file past, leaning upon their staves or against the heads of their donkeys.

The women chattered merrily. The more prosperous among them wore gaily coloured aprons and, nearly all of them, coral necklaces, Moorish ear-rings, and silver-plated crosses and medallions which resembled the *ex-votos* hung before shrines. The greater part of this

crowd had left their distant cottages or farms by starlight, before the break of day.

“Get back there—can’t you hear me?” shouted a constable, drunk with authority, as he brutally drove back the rustics in order to clear the human lane down which the ladies and gentlemen were entering the church.

“Do you wish us, Sir Constable, to massage the legs of my lady the mule, here?” a woman of the town replied.

“Get back, I tell you, for the second time.”

“Take your hands off.”

“Look out, Antonio, it is not a market day.”

The hawkers were taking advantage of the occasion to cry their wares.

“Beautiful lady, a *real* and this rosary is yours.”

“I’ll give you a *cuarto* at the most.”

“From which pocket—the one in front or the one behind?”

“The devil take the rascal!”

• • • • •

The church was filled to overflowing. A cloud of incense, iridescent in the sunlight, floated high above the congregation. The long rays which streamed through the stained-glass windows bathed the stone and alabaster work in a multi-coloured, spectral light, enamelling the gold upon the pulpits and causing the dark oak to glow like mother-of-pearl. Beatrice went to kneel down with the ladies of the nobility, between the choir and the high altar. The dignitaries, resplendent in their jewels and decorations, occupied the stalls in the centre.

The chanting of the litanies re-echoed high up in the vaulted roof, a sublime, impressive monotone. At length the deacons appeared in their white vestments. So soon as the Mass commenced, Beatrice noticed that Gonzalo de San Vicente, who, dressed as the duenna had described, was kneeling upon his glove in the nave opposite, was casting sidelong glances at her as he made the sign of the cross. She responded with a tender look,

then, lowering her head, she heaved a deep sigh and turned her eyes once again upon her book.

His Lordship Don Jerome Manrique de Lara was holding aloft the censer in his pale, bony hands. The smoke, like some miraculous cloud, diffused itself in an instant throughout the choir, enveloping the priest and the deacons, bedimming the gilded work, covering with a sunlit veil the paintings upon the reredos. Suddenly the voice of the priest could be heard intoning the first words of the *Gloria*, and then, as though the sepulchre of silence and of sorrow which the Church erects upon the morning of Holy Thursday had collapsed thunderously to the ground, there breaks forth in one resounding peal the rattle of the kettle-drums, the high, plaintive notes of the hautboys, the whirlwind roar of the organ and, away up above in the sunlit air outside, there suddenly bursts upon the ear the quick, staccato pealing of a thousand bells, frenzied, violent, delirious, crying to the wind the sublime and millenary joy of the Resurrection.

At that moment, Beatrice, as she raised her head, saw beside a column on her right the ghost of . . . no, Ramiro, Ramiro himself!

The organ and the trumpets pealed forth once again. The heads of the kneeling multitude bowed low before a tempest of devotional fervour. Beatrice felt herself lose consciousness, confounding in one transport the Resurrection of the Lord and the presence of the pale boy in whose face she could trace a sudden resemblance to the wonderful, emaciated countenance of the Passion. Upon the last words of the Gospel, Ramiro began quietly to leave the church. He leaned against the tomb of Don Diego del Águila, his forehead pressed against the walls, as though he were hoping for some word of counsel from that ancient knight of his lineage who was sleeping his last and honourable sleep there in the sepulchre. The people passed out through all the doors of the church. Ramiro observed that his rival had taken up his stand

by a stoup of holy water, his fingers on the rim of the basin. Assuredly he was waiting for Beatrice.

“I must conquer here and now,” he said to himself. And, in obedience to an irresistible impulse, he went to hide himself behind the same pillar. Thus, when Beatrice was but a few paces distant and Gonzalo rushed forward to offer her the holy water, Ramiro also hastily moistened his fingers, and held them out to her with a calm, imperious air. Surprised by these two gestures, the girl hesitated; but almost immediately, lowering her eyes, she extended, as she passed him, her trembling hand to Ramiro.

The two youths glared ferociously at one another. Gonzalo did not conceal his anger, while Ramiro, turning his head and lifting up his cloak behind with his rapier, looked over his shoulder at his rival with a smile far more insulting than any words could have been.

When Ramiro, upon leaving the cathedral, felt once more beneath his feet the sunlit stones of the *plazuela*, it seemed to him that all these neighbours, all these strangers, these castles and towers, men and inanimate objects alike, were but the stage set by the hand of God for the representation of the drama of his, Ramiro’s, life; that he, Ramiro, was life itself, that the whole of life was but a creation of his own soul. The demon of pride exalted him into high places, far above the human anthill, and once again, under the intoxicating rays of the sun, he felt upon his forehead the kiss or sting of some invisible chimera.

He passed the whole day in wandering about the city. The heavy perfumes of spring overflowed the walls of the gardens, diffusing themselves throughout the streets. He too felt himself reborn together with the leaves and flowers.

Although his wound troubled him, he went out again after dinner. The constellations trembled in the immense, limpid azure of the sky. He remembered that the Church celebrated in anticipation the Resurrection, and that

the body of Jesus had remained in the sepulchre until the following morning. With this thought in his mind, he gazed up into the heavens, and it seemed to him that he inhaled the perfume of the divine cerements, like a sacred breath from the stars.

Once in his room, after a few moments' rest, he felt in his side the burning pain of former days. The wound had reopened. The next morning the surgeon prescribed another claustration.

Fortunately the squire came in shortly afterwards and, hearing Ramiro's moans, ventured to say:

"That reminds me of an arrow wound which I received on the coast of Tripoli. Gangrene set in, and it refused to heal. One day, thinking myself cured, I went on shore—and it reopened. At length a friend of mine, a Segovian, plunged the shaft of a cross-bow, red hot, into the wound, and in a few days I was able to walk with ease."

He suggested the same remedy. The youth agreed, and a white-hot iron applied to the scar cured it for ever.

XXVII

DURING the days that followed, Ramiro experienced a series of those interior struggles in which the eternal youth of the soul grapples with maturity. Reason preaches, counsels, exhorts, while the will, feeling itself at last subdued, prepares to obey. Then comes the time for action, and there remains only the throw of fortune's dice and a burning in the blood.

A few days after his mother's injunction, in a moment of devotional fervour and remorse, he had promised the Divine Majesty that he would enter the Carmelite Order so soon as he had concluded his studies. It appeared to him that his vow, sworn in a moment of passion, was now suspended at an inaccessible height above his

soul. It was nevertheless absolutely necessary to fulfil it under pain of damnation in this life and the next, for the Lord never forgave such perjuries.

Then out crept the evil spirits like syrens. One whispered that such a sacrifice would prove useless and sterile, for he was not the man to uproot from his soul the desire to live proudly, to triumph, to hurl himself upon the prey of luxury and arrogance. Another spoke to him with an hypocritical meekness: "There will be plenty of time in which to don the monk's habit; before then you must have experience of the world and get to know all the evil of life, so that you may emerge cleansed by its purgatorial fire, like steel from the furnace. Only thus will you be able to understand the greatness of that sublime renunciation of the cloister."

But he shut his ears indignantly to all such speeches, recognising in them the specious eloquence of the tempter. As for Beatrice, it was useless to allow his thoughts to dwell upon her. He had attained his object by humiliating his rival and proving to him that, if he, Ramiro, willed it, the daughter of Blázquez Serrano would become his wife. Why go farther?

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One warm afternoon towards the end of April, he went for a walk along the path which skirts the exterior of the city walls. He left the city, as was his wont, by the Gate of Antonio Vela. Throughout the month no rain had fallen. The valley, with its melancholy corn fields, unfolded itself there below him, thirsty, white with dust. As he arrived at the corner of the Alcázar, he turned to the left and went on straight before him.

Solitary among the rocks and bathed in the dying splendour of the evening, the Roman basilica of St. Vincent glowed like a copper reliquary. The two immense turrets above the gate through which he had just passed were enveloped in an almost nocturnal gloom. Ramiro raised his eyes in order to look at the

frail stone bridge which unites its towers, and which at that moment stood out black and forbidding against a sky of flaming gold.

To the south wind which, from early morning, had churned up continual whirlpools of dust along the roads, there now succeeded a dead calm, giving to the landscape the appearance of a picture. Loud, joyous cries re-echoed continually among the hills. Ramiro allowed this languor, this twilight stillness which un-yokes the oxen and refreshes in every cottage the fore-heads and breasts of the peasants, to take possession of his soul.

He entered the city, and, as he was crossing the Plazuela de Sofraga, he saw around the fountain eight or nine water-girls who were talking and gossiping away an idle hour, their lips wreathed in smiles. He himself, dry with thirst, envisaged as a gospel miracle that abundant fluid which, leaping forth from the sun-baked wall, flowed over the edge of the basin and trickled down into the street.

He halted and leant against the wall opposite. One of the girls was blonde and well made. With her pitcher upon her hip, her stomach supported upon the hard granite, she craned forward eagerly to receive upon her lips the long kiss of the water. When she again stood erect her damp corsage revealed, as though they had been naked, her shoulders and her breasts.

This beautiful woman, with her voluptuous movements, seemed to Ramiro the very incarnation of desire. Never as this evening, since his long seclusion, had he felt so strongly the allurement of woman. Was this, indeed, some devilish lure, this intoxication in the air, this vague perfume of the female which caused the saints to tremble, and against which the convents raised their powerful, windowless walls? Was it not, perchance, the Divine Potter who had shaped with evident delight the curves of that wonderful amphora? How could it be so great a sin to taste of its sweets? Ah! Why so much

fear, so much anguish? Why not enjoy a beautiful creature as one enjoys the fruit of a tree? Why did not these girls, who glanced at him with a cautious but voluptuous longing, come and offer themselves to him ingenuously, one by one, as in his dreams? Why did so much fear enter into the most delicious consolation the world can offer?

A group of people were approaching along the Calleja del Tostado.

A few moments later, the youth was surprised to find himself in the presence of Beatrice and Doña Álvarez. They were both in sedan chairs. The girl's black cloak was covered with fine white sand, and her skin was discoloured by the dust. Her eyelashes were of an ashen hue; her hair was dry and frosty in appearance.

Doubtless they were coming from some neighbouring farm. As she passed by the fountain, Beatrice could not resist the temptation and, leaning forward, she beckoned the girls to hand her a pitcher. Then, drawing back her veil and gluing her mouth to the moist clay, she began to drink like a village girl. Then Doña Álvarez, raising her staff, let it fall upon the pitcher, saying in a low, stern voice:

“The daughter of a Blázquez does not drink in the streets.”

The girl obeyed and, smiling at her old lover who was approaching her, she murmured gently:

“Next Sunday my father returns from court. Come to pay your respects to him.”

XXVIII

On the following Sunday, Ramiro performed his toilet with more than wonted care and, at three o'clock in the afternoon, set out to call upon Don Alonso. His heart, his imagination, his pride, like the sails of a boat in the wind, all impelled him in the same direction. Reasons,

also, were not lacking which proved to his own satisfaction the extreme advisability of the step he was about to take. If he were shortly obliged to leave the town there could be no better occasion than this upon which to free Don Alonso from the promise he had made concerning the Order of Chivalry, and to reveal to father and daughter the object of his journey.

When Ramiro entered the picture gallery, Blázquez Serrano was exhibiting to a crowd of admiring friends a new painting which he had acquired at court.

“Some,” he was saying, “attribute it to Raphael de Urbino, and upon my faith, I see upon this canvas his skill in the use of pigments and his master touch in the profile.”

And, around the easel, lips were pursed in mute admiration, hands were rounded in telescope fashion, spectacles were removed and held before the eyes at arm’s length, to be withdrawn again immediately. A contagious enthusiasm provoked all manner of laudatory phrases and interjections.

At last the learned Señor de Mújica exclaimed:

“It is worthy of Apelles and Parrhasius.”

Ramiro also would have liked to give his opinion. He was convinced that the majority of those gentlemen knew very little about painting. All, nevertheless, manifested the same delirious enthusiasm and sang the praises of the great masters as they had never extolled the heroes or the saints. Then he meditated upon that glory which all so freely recognised, recalling the famous artists who had enjoyed the adulation of priests and kings, and he fancied that he himself in the exercise of that calling would quickly have attained to universal fame, pleasure, riches—all by means of a bundle of brushes! But he would not have painted in that insipid, effeminate style, that style which knew not the power of mysterious contrasts. As a child, he had felt the charm of sombre interiors, in which the eyes are relieved from the implacable glare outside and in which a single ray

of light can reveal, on a sudden, the beauties of form and colour. In his opinion, painting should have something of the same allurement as the chiaroscuro of rooms, rendering one's dreams more vivid, more profound.

Don Alonso, when he saw Ramiro approaching, took the youth's hands amiably in his own and, after a moment's silence, asked him in a low voice:

"Would your grace care to pass into the drawing-room? There you will find my daughter Beatrice with some young gentlemen and girls whom she has invited. They are all young and full of spirits."

Ramiro bowed, and the *caballero* conducted him in person along the galleries. Before permitting him to enter the room, however, he detained him a moment, saying:

"I wanted to tell your grace that the question of the Order will have to lie fallow for a little while, since his majesty . . ."

"It will be better thus, sire," replied Ramiro, "for I myself now do not know whether or no I should accept it."

"And what would your grace say," continued Don Alonso, "if they made you a *regidor*, like San Vicente's son?"

"A *regidor*? If I were not obliged to follow the path which I intend to take, I should aim at something higher. Caesar or nothing!" added Ramiro with a smile.

He suddenly found himself alone in the centre of a gloomy chamber in which he could distinguish not a single face. He then made a slow bow, divining behind the balustrade a group of young girls and gallants who had just ceased talking. At length a voice exclaimed:

"Let your grace approach the dais."

It was Beatrice. He had to go forward, and did so; but after a few lucky steps, he overturned a metal tray, with a loud crashing of broken glass and porcelain. A laugh, light as a zephyr, rang out. He proceeded to walk in the opposite direction, and a cup which had

rolled on to the carpet cracked under his feet like a crushed nut. Someone twanged mockingly the cords of a rebeck. The laughter grew louder.

He was trembling from head to foot, and it was, perchance, his very confusion which suddenly revealed to him a group of young girls seated, in Moorish fashion, upon velvet cushions, together with the gallants who smilingly attended them, kneeling upon the cork carpet. Ramiro, after formal greetings had been exchanged, went to kneel down before Beatrice. His confusion was profound. The girl asked after his family, and he answered her in abashed tones, unable to think of anything save his grotesque entry. He had never before felt so ashamed. With what gestures, with what phrases could he recover his dignity?

All invited Beatrice to dance, and she refused hesitatingly. Her eyes sparkled like glow-worms, and the dead whiteness of her skin gleamed in the darkness like a lily in the night. Gallants and maidens, all spoke in an affected, extravagant manner, each couple adorning their sallies with the most bizarre preciosities. The sun, the moon, the stars, all were laid under contribution to formulate excuses, express complaints or render homage. Guitars and viols were tuned, and a murmur of anticipation ran through the assembly.

Suddenly Beatrice rose to her feet. The lieutenant, Antonio de Castro, just arrived from Naples, asked if he might be her partner. He swore *per Baco!* at every moment, in order to amuse the girls.

All demanded different dances: the *pavana*, the *alemana*, the *pie del gibao*, the *gallarda*. The lieutenant voted for the *gallarda*—*per Baco!*—and, taking Beatrice's hand, he placed a small perfumed handkerchief between her palm and his own.

They took five steps forward, then five steps back. The instruments resounded with an archaic languor, and the brilliant soldier led the girl majestically through the pompous, lordly labyrinth of the ancestral dance.

She gazed rapturously into his eyes; offering herself to him like a winged creature, floating upon the wave of sound from the viols; now evading him with a roguish timidity when the rhythmic movement of the dance grew faster. Her charm was intoxicating, maddening. A lackey had just opened the shutters of a window, and the girl now flitted from the shadow into the light like a vision, the smoke from the censers floating behind her. Every piquant gesture, every difficult step, was greeted by loud applause from the dais. Ramiro felt himself overwhelmed, annihilated by that triumph. It was an unexpected emotion. It seemed to him now and then that his whole soul was clinging to her hair, like the heavy smoke of the censers.

When the *gallarda* came to a conclusion, all of one accord demanded the Dance of the Dust. Beatrice went to peep through the chink of a door, fearing that her father might come in. After posting the lieutenant on this spot, she went towards the window, the gold spangles and beads of her gown sparkling in the light. Then, slightly raising her skirt with both hands, and looking down at her feet, she began to beat upon the Oriental carpet a mad dance, within a circle so small that she might have danced it upon a plate. She sang:

I will grind the little grains of dust
So small, so small. . . .

And those upon the platform took up the refrain to the tune of the guitars:

I will grind the dust with my feet,
So small. . . .

“*Per Baco! Per Baco!*” shouted the lieutenant, beating time upon the palm of his hand.

Beatrice at length fell exhausted upon the velvet cushion, next to Ramiro. The fragrance of her clothing was more intense. Leocadia approached her and, kneeling, offered her some chocolate in a golden cup.

"No, bring me a little clay," replied Beatrice.

The servant immediately offered her, upon a salver, the fragments of a Mexican vase which had just been broken. The girl took a small piece of this edible clay and began to chew it, crunching it between her teeth. Some of her friends followed suit.

Ramiro would have liked to deprive her of all the gallantries, all the compliments which the others showered upon her. He was jealous of every word. He began to talk about himself, about themselves, recalling the days of their childhood. In answer to a question which the girl had asked him, he confided to her, as quietly as possible, the promise he had made his mother to leave shortly for Salamanca, where he was to complete his studies.

"I am certain," said Beatrice in reply, "that your grace will become a great scholar. But I do not admire your taste. Some war would be more suited to your valour. For my part, I say it frankly, one soldier is worth a thousand bachelors."

"Learning also brings with it no mean renown," answered Ramiro.

"What greater glory is there for a gallant man than to have killed many Turks and Frenchmen with his own sword? My father took part in a great battle on the sea. Look at the lieutenant, who has seen many battles, many indeed, and who is dancing here with us now as though it were nothing. Thus I should like to see your grace—and even better."

"Do you so greatly admire the lieutenant?"

"He is indeed brave and witty."

Three girls and two youths were now playing upon the violin, the rebeck and the spinet. It was music which stirred the soul. Ramiro felt himself intoxicated, as though by some potent liquor. He had become a strange being, entirely foreign to his ordinary self. His customary ideas had fled far away, leaving him alone with an imperious passion which had suddenly arisen.

from some unknown recess of his soul and to which all his instincts hastened to submit themselves like humble slaves.

He knew not what he thought nor what he was about to say, and for that reason he fathomed more deeply than ever those gloomy depths of his being upon whose surface his emotions, his will, his conscience were no more than the frothing of some incomprehensible ebullition of the spirit to which he now surrendered himself.

The voice of Beatrice disturbed his dreams:

“How pensive you are, how sad!”

Ramiro did not know what to reply.

“Ah! no: it is that wound which pains you from time to time?”

“That wound has healed, Beatrice,” answered the youth, “it is another which has reopened, and death is coming upon me.”

“Death?”

“A delicious death, which is life, for if that wound did not kill me I should die.”

“That is a pretty speech.”

“An exquisite wound which tortures me with sweet memories.”

Beatrice sighed. Ramiro’s lips were parted in a voluptuous smile. Then, in a very low voice, bending towards her, he went on:

“I remember now how I used to look out of my window at nights, away there in the manor. Everybody in your house was asleep. You, too, were lost in dreams. I used to fancy then that the faint fragrance of the garden was the perfume of your breath, and my eyes, raised to heaven, sought to discover what the stars then knew, and what they still know, of our destinies. . . . I love you, Beatrice! . . .”

The girl sighed again, and Ramiro felt her tiny hand seek his. Their fingers intertwined in a passionate clasp.

“How happy I am!”—stammered Ramiro. “Tell me that you will assuage my grief, and that you will love

me truly. Ah! When shall I be able to call you wife, my Beatrice—mine, all, *all* mine?"

His breath fanned the girl's pale cheek.

At that moment someone uttered the name of Gonzalo de San Vicente, and Beatrice pressed Ramiro's hand, begging him to let her listen to what was being said. Pedro Valdivieso was telling them that Don Philip himself, in the king's name, had just presented his son with the nomination to the post of *regidor*.

Four lackeys entered the room bearing eight lighted candelabra, and a moment later the master of the house came in, accompanied by a few gentlemen. Girls and youths all rose to their feet. Don Alonso summoned his daughter to pay her respects to her relation the Marquis de las Navas.

XXIX

Two days later, a hawker of rosaries presented Ramiro with a favour of green satin. It was from Beatrice. He did not venture, as other love-sick gallants were wont to do with such tokens, to fasten it in his cap, but decided to carry it upon his person, between his doublet and his cloak. He, too, was in need of some trustworthy go-between. The idea of suborning Doña Álvarez was repugnant to him, so he sent for Casilda.

The girl, lowering her eyes, listened to the messages in silence and then left to repeat them, word for word, to Beatrice. She also took with her a diamond ring, bringing back with her another in return, a lordly one indeed, with a Florentine seal engraved upon a chrysolite. Casilda made an excellent intermediary and, as she was in the habit of frequenting all the quarters of the town, she was wont, willy-nilly, to overhear gossip and unearth secrets. From her Ramiro learned that the lackeys of Gonzalo de San Vicente were frequently

to be seen in conversation with Doña Álvarez; and that Pedro, his younger brother, was no sooner drunk in a tavern than he began to cry, banging upon the tables with his fist, that if Gonzalo married Don Alonso's daughter he would stab them both to the heart on their wedding night.

Very soon now, on the day of St. Rita and St. Quiteria, Ramiro was to leave for Salamanca. Once in that town he would, in the course of a few weeks, inform his mother concerning the state of his soul. Perchance when he found himself in that amazing city, the "wonder of the world," among the living examples of piety and wisdom, his heart would incline him irresistibly towards the spiritual glory of the soldiers of Christ. But if this were not the case, if his vocation did not patently reveal itself, he was resolved to tread a different path. A rich patrimony, he reflected, was soon to fall into his hands.

He dedicated the short space of time which remained to him especially to Beatrice. He prowled around her house from morning until night. Sometimes he saw her appear behind the window panes; sometimes, after making an arrangement with her through Casilda, he left the city and went to seat himself upon a stone opposite a stretch of wall which faced her home, until she appeared there between two merlons of the battlements.

On the eve of his departure, Ramiro spent more than an hour on this spot, hoping that Beatrice would appear upon the tower. Complete silence reigned. The youth did not remove his eyes from the rugged wall, at the foot of which the granite rock, hewn by immemorial hands, reminded him of waves dashing against a cliff. At last the girl appeared; and something white, a piece of paper, a letter! fluttered down through the air. What precious message was borne for him upon those white wings?

What words had his beloved chosen to transfer to that solemn farewell a portion of her soul? He caught the paper in his hat and opened it. It read as follows:

I should love you even more than I love you now if, as soon as you arrive at Salamanca, you would yourself choose, in the shop of the Zamorano, a fine, well-tuned viol. I should like it to reach me soon, soon, from the hands of some traveller, for I am greatly in need of it. They tell me that the priest of St. John is returning this week.

A pleasant journey, my dear Sir Bachelor.

BEATRICE.

I am ordering the duenna to write this letter, for yesterday I hurt my finger when playing in the garden with some friends. . . .

Doña Guiomar had stirred her large retinue of servants into an unwonted activity. On the following day, early in the morning, all was in readiness; and, when the hour arrived, they led out into the streets by the principal gates the mules laden with baggage, the hack for Ramiro and the ass for the Canon, who was to accompany him as far as Castellanos de la Cañada.

Ramiro went up to bid his grandfather good-bye. Don Iñigo, in a dazed, half-witted way, allowed the boy to kiss his hand. The blizzard of old age had burst suddenly over his head, freezing into immobility the last activities of his mind. His wrinkled face was here yellow, here brown, like the rind of an old, dry lemon. Doña Guiomar embraced Ramiro in her turn forcing a smile beneath her tears; and, so that she might follow him with her eyes, went up with her serving-maids into the tower of the manor.

My son: Thou art long in replying to a mother who loves thee more than she loves herself. Up to this day, the day of Pentecost, I have had no news of thee other than that which I have heard from the lips of Carmona, the lawyer.

Thus commenced Doña Guiomar's second letter to her son.

At length, one morning, a Carmelite friar, returning

from Alba de Tormes, extracted, in her presence, from the folds of his sleeve, the longed-for paper. Ramiro first recounted his interview with the rector of the Archbishop's College, in whose hands he had placed all his letters of introduction. Then he told her of his preliminary entrance into the Escuelas Menores.

It is an astounding thing [he said] that in spite of the ancient custom of tormenting the "new men" with every conceivable cruelty, so soon as I entered the cloisters, glaring round fiercely at everyone present, my hand on the hilt of my sword and my spurs jingling bravely, no one dared to move. I cannot imagine how, but all of them had heard of my adventure with the *moriscos*. A bearded student told me yesterday that from the time of his first entrance into the schools, he cannot remember a single other "new man" who escaped the ordeal of being spat upon.

Then he added:

You remember, Mother, that Captain, Antonio de Quiñones, who was to come to our house? I saw him in Castellanos, and he wanted me to accompany him upon an expedition against the corsairs. Seeing that I resisted his efforts to persuade me, he said, "Reflect, your grace, that God did not intend you to be a monk, but rather a soldier. Have a care that you make no mistake, for you will regret it if you do. I shall await you in Cartagena until the day of St. Peter and St. Paul."

The letter contained nothing further. A little later, another missive arrived, still shorter, in which Ramiro merely informed her that at the Archbishop's College he had been asked for proof of his unblemished lineage.

This [he added] has always been the custom in the case of all entrants, and some of the pupils belong to the noblest families in Spain. But was not, perchance, my name sufficient, together with the fact that I am your son and the descendant of such famous ancestors, to make further proof unnecessary? At first I thought of sending them the saddle cloths of my mules so that they could see the scutcheons for themselves! But the rule must be complied with.

Doña Guiomar sent him by an old servant, mounted on a swift horse, a laconic letter, in which she bade him

return as soon as possible, for his grandfather was seriously ill. Don Iñigo, the prey of a mysterious malady, was about to pass in great agony to a better life, an incessant prayer upon his lips. That noisome mass of flesh, putrefying and liquefiant, was anticipating the sinister labours of the tomb. A subtle, fetid odour permeated the house. The servants and the duennas held their noses as they passed by the door of the invalid's room. Meanwhile Doña Guiomar did not leave his bedside for an instant, as though she wished to offer up as a sacrifice to the Lord the prolonged physical and mental torture inflicted upon her in that stifling room.

Ramiro returned home as soon as possible. As he entered the city by the Gate of the Bridge, one of the guards remarked to him:

“Your grace is too late. Your grandfather has already been taken.”

Don Iñigo had been buried on the previous day.

When the youth entered the old man's apartments, he thought at first that he would be unable to take more than a few steps into the room, so terrible was the stench which pervaded the shuttered chamber. The bed was just as it had been left by the agonies of death, and the pillow bore the imprint of that head which would never again muse or dream upon its downy softness. The phials of medicines, the long, narrow goblets, the mortars, the cups, the bandages, all lay scattered in confusion upon the chairs and tables, eloquent of the anguish of that supreme struggle.

He went into the library and, when his eyes fell upon the volumes piled up on the floor and the horn spectacles which marked the page of a folio, ready for another day's perusal; when he saw, hanging from a nail, the yellow stocking in which the old man used to keep his brushes for illuminating title pages; and, farther away, in the corner, black with the grease of ointments, the stool which served as a support for his gouty leg, Ramiro felt a profound melancholy take possession of his soul.

This, then, was the end of all our strivings. Here, amid the visible signs of a soul's passing, one might divine those eternally ambiguous admonitions which impel us now to snatch at pleasure while we may, now to bow our heads in renunciation.

When calm reigned once more and the silent, monotonous daily round had been resumed, Doña Guiomar drew Ramiro apart and informed him in a few words of the state in which Don Iñigo had left his ancient patrimony. They were completely ruined. They had lived up to now by employing every conceivable expedient to postpone the final crash. They had pledged, one by one, with the Genoese, all their family possessions, and had ended by selling *en bloc* their silver, their jewels and their tapestries. The Flemish majordomo, who was, she said, the only individual who properly understood the management of their affairs, and who, perhaps, would have been able to suggest fresh expedients, had just left for his own country where an inheritance awaited him. They had nothing apart from the manor, mortgaged up to the hilt, and a chest containing a few crowns which would very quickly be exhausted. It would then be necessary for them to sell the family mansion and go to live in some modest house in the suburbs.

"In any case," added Doña Guiomar, "thou hast now no need of great wealth. Holy Church demands goods of a purer sort; and it now occurs to me that thou couldst study theology at a seminary in this very city."

Ramiro had listened to his mother in absolute astonishment. Ruined! Was it indeed possible? And all those rich possessions which they had inherited, through innumerable alliances, from their most remote ancestors, all the land granted to them by kings, all their manorial rights in Segovia, all those houses, all those domains in Ávila and the surrounding country, all those properties cited upon every page of their family records?

In different circumstances the idea of poverty

would not have disturbed him, for he knew that lack of possessions is an incitement to heroic deeds. But now he instinctively foresaw, as a sequel to this disaster, a terrible reverse in love. He bowed his head in silence and, after a moment's hesitation, informed his mother of a resolution which he himself had not yet made: his intention to marry Beatrice. In the same firm tones, he also told her how grave a sin it would be to continue to delude her with the hope that he would some day enter the Church.

Doña Guiomar did not stir an eyelash, but her fingers drummed nervously upon the arm of the chair in which she was sitting. Then Ramiro, kneeling down before her, frenziedly took both her hands in his and, looking her straight in the eyes, pleaded with her to assist him in his purpose and implored her, for the love of God, not to sell the manor. Let her think what an impression so ignoble an action would make upon Don Alonso and his daughter.

“*I will deal with the Genoese,*” he added. “There must be something left which we can give them; there is still some furniture and my jewelled dagger. But, mother, for the sake of our honour, do not sell the house —please, please do not sell the house!”

She rose slowly to her feet, her left hand upon her breast.

“After what thou hast just said,” she replied, “my life in the world is over. Thou art the master now. Give thy orders, and may God pardon thee.”

Her face took on a strange expression, and she smiled in her terrible anguish.

Walking up to the table, she removed the wick from the lamp, trimmed it and replaced it. Then, without uttering a word, she left the room.

PART II

PART II

I

KING PHILIP THE SECOND of Spain was rightly dubbed “the Prudent.”

Fierce had been the tumults and excesses in Aragón; yet, at the close of the year 1591, peace and concord seemed to reign once more under the feigned clemency of the monarch. Messieurs the rebels, their suspicion disarmed, returned to Saragossa and invited the officers of the Castilian army to their tables. The time for the royal vengeance was ripe.

One morning, the chief justiciary of Aragón, Don Juan de Lanuza, was arrested, in the king’s name, as he mounted the steps of the cathedral. A captain of arquebusiers lay in wait for him from an early hour of the morning, affecting to examine the engravings in a bookseller’s shop.

“ You shall seize Don Juan de Lanuza, and behead him without delay.” Such were the orders written by the hand of Philip himself.

“ And who condemns me? ” the justiciary had asked, after he had listened to the reading of his sentence.

“ The king himself,” they told him.

“ No one has the right to pass judgment upon me,” he replied, “ save the crown and the kingdom as united in Cortes.”

On the morrow the first magistrate of Aragón was beheaded by the public executioner. Thus did the king “adjust justice” and abolish for ever the rights which had been firmly established for several centuries.

Other noblemen, among them Don Diego de Heredia, Baron of Bárboles, and Don Juan de Luna, Lord of Purroy, suffered a like fate, after undergoing the most fiendish tortures. The Duke of Villahermosa and the Count of Aranda perished mysteriously in prison. Some rebels, who did not enjoy the aristocratic privilege of decapitation, were drawn through the streets to the garrote upon the shameful hurdle.

Thus were chastised the defenders of Antonio Pérez, thus was broken for ever the haughty spirit of Aragón, which had only deigned to cast its proud alms into the monarch's coffers at intervals of three years. In the same way, some years before, the people of Castile had learned their lesson at the hands of the emperor, on the occasion of the revolt of the Comuneros; but there could still be found among them one or two ineffective promoters of rebellion, as who should attempt to make a gelding rear itself for service. Not merely the nobility but also the people were beginning to murmur. It was high time to make a fresh example of Castile. A haughty city had just furnished the occasion.

On the 21st of October, when the royal army was passing through Aragón on its way to France, there were posted upon the doors and walls of the cathedral, the Church of St. John, the new slaughter-houses, the residence of the Valderrábano family, and other public buildings in Ávila, seven copies of the seditious *pasquinade* which Ramiro and the Canon had heard Don Enrique Dávila read aloud that evening in the basement of the manor.

On the following day, the chief magistrate, Don Alonso de Cárcamo, despatched a courier to the Escorial. His majesty's sole response took the form of a sombre collection of sheriffs, sent for the purpose of inaugurating proceedings. The punishment, it was hoped, would be light, and the more scurrilous among the disaffected composed satiric verses and lampoons upon the subject.

On the 14th of February, 1592, sentence was pronounced. Don Diego de Bracamonte, Don Enrique Dávila, and Daza Zimbrón, the lawyer, were condemned to be beheaded. The priest of St. Thomas, Marcos López, was to be unfrocked and deprived of his benefice, half his goods were to be confiscated and, after ten years in the galleys, he was to suffer exile *ad vitam*. For the notary Antonio Diaz, a flogging, ten years in the galleys and perpetual exile.

Many thought that this was a patent case of providential intervention; and it was under the protection of Providence—drawing a moral from every example he made—that the monarch consummated his task. Let there be an end to local government, an end to these haughty, arrogant airs which harass the ruling power. Unity was the first principle of his royal art, unity absolute and invulnerable, in the image of that other unity which ruled the universe. Let there be no will but *his* will, no thought but *his* thought, no faith but the faith which he himself professed. The king of the modern Israel must gird himself with the three tutelary weapons: the law, the sword and the ephod. He must be at once the Moses, the Joshua and the Aaron of his people. All thrones, all mighty seats, must serve him as a ladder by which he may ascend even unto heaven, there to receive, in solitary splendour, the decrees of the Almighty. Land and sea must lie beneath the shadow of his wings. Nations must lift up their eyes to him as though he were the new archangel, armed with a flaming sword, the conqueror of Satan.

Meanwhile Spain was burned with a consuming fire. The fever of this monstrous delirium dried up the blood in her veins. The king demanded and exacted without respite, swollen with gifts, dropsical. At times, as he squeezed the dry udders of his people, he succeeded only in extracting blood. It was impossible to leave the armies unpaid, to abandon the bribing of princes and cardinals. Bankruptcy stretched forth its

innumerable tentacles over the land, intertwining them, twisting them together in an enormous nightmare skein. Debts breathed feverishly, the royal domains were panting; every year the income of the one to follow was squandered.

What expedient, what stratagem, yet remained to be tried? At one fell swoop he seized the consignments of gold and silver which had been shipped from the Indies to private individuals; sold titles of nobility, *juros*,¹ government posts; invited the clergy to legitimise their sacrilegious sons by means of a handful of *reals*; forbade the exportation of wool; taxed bread and wine, which had previously borne no duty; monopolised the salt; abolished the *maestrazgos*² of the navy; doubled the customs duties, and quickly trebled the terrible *alcabala*.³ Their backs broken, the towns were on the point of death. Ávila, Toro, Cordova and Granada refused to accept the poll-tax of 1576. Abroad, the bankers turned pale at the mere name of Philip II, and the Fuggers at last knotted up their purses and turned their backs upon him. Others knew not whether to continue or break with him for ever, like a Jew who has lent money to a gambler with a long rapier. The Genoese still defended themselves by the practice of usury. After 1590 the disorder threatened the royal treasury. The Cortes, bribed by the monarch, had extracted from the cities a sum of eight million ducats.

And poverty and famine swept over the land like flails of God. A malefic spell seemed to make sterile the furrows, check the sails of the windmills in their course, and, dislocating the arms of the artisans, prevent the windlasses from turning and the looms from weaving. Many were no longer able to earn their living, and set out to steal whatever they could lay their hands on. Existence was rendered difficult and uncertain by crime;

¹ Rights of perpetual property. ² Rights of jurisdiction.
 ³ A tax on wheat.

men fell upon their bread as upon a prey. The pilferings to which they were incited by hunger were exalted into a subtle and honourable art, an art which had its *romancero*,¹ its manuals, its poets and its bachelors. The malady attacked most fiercely those *hidalgos* whose patrimony was exhausted, and whose pure and ancient lineage would not permit them to demean themselves by adopting a trade. Many were glad to devour the crusts which their pages had stolen, and sighed longingly beneath their cloaks, a sad and honourable sigh, as they sniffed, in passing, the warm, appetising odour of the pastrycooks' shops. In order to eke out an existence, students would copy the tricks and ruses of street urchins. Their feet, swift as greyhounds, were the terror of the merchants. This was the glorious age of the common stewpan. The monasteries were filled to overflowing with monks, and beggars congregated upon their doorsteps. Hospitals and prisons were regarded as blessed sanctuaries where one obtained one's victuals with a miraculous regularity. Thousands of unfortunate creatures bedizened their faces with bloody weals or committed crimes in order to obtain their daily bread. The streets were crowded with spurious beggars; the countryside swarmed with false anchorites; the ports teemed with ravenous *hidalgos*, eagerly seeking a place in the galleons.

To this bodily anguish was added a vexation of the spirit, a not dishonourable dread of finding oneself under the suspicion of the Holy Office, or of drawing down upon oneself the chastisements which the super-human power of the monarch was able to inflict. It seemed that the very wind whispered calumnies and that betrayal lay in ambush beneath the couch upon which one slept, in the folds of the door curtains, in the nooks and crannies of oratories. Many, like Don Alonso, were afraid of what their own tongues might disclose in sleep, and they carefully avoided

¹ A collection of ballads.

dozing in their arm-chairs when the servants were about the house. All effrontery proved fatal, and silence itself was no guarantee of security. *Ne contumax silentium, ne suspecta libertas.* The thought was in all minds and no pen dared to write what every soul concealed within its hidden depths. One spoke with longing, on the contrary, of distant countries and the inviolable peace of the cloister.

Some, however, had a sincere affection for the monarch, recognising in the person of the king the triumph or humiliation of their own fanatical pride. The majority, under the pressure of coercion, were at last persuaded to sing his praises.

Virility seemed then to insinuate itself into the very blood of the people, hardening their vitals, converting their ancient valour into a stoical contempt for all bodily ills. Tyranny had cast upon them its inexplicable spell, and more than one among them, disgusted at his own servility, would, at the slightest sign from the monarch, have gladly opened his veins, with the imperturbability of a Seneca or a Petronius.

The Spanish temper grew reserved and sullen. A veritable plague of melancholy swept over the country, like a blast from Purgatory, infecting every soul.

The hidalgos attired themselves in mourning black; the fashionable wood of the period was ebony. At no time were the appurtenances of death so lugubrious, so ghastly.

The spirit was absorbed in deriving its essential ideas from the grave and all its loathsome corruption.

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Ramiro arrived back from Salamanca on Sunday, the 16th of February, 1592, two days after the proclamation of the sentences. The Canon came to see him and informed him, one by one, of the convictions. He did not seem very pleased when he told him that Don Enrique Dávila and Daza Zimbrón, the lawyer, had been

granted leave to appeal. As for Don Diego, he was to be beheaded on the morrow.

“ You see now, my son,” he added, “ that your grandfather departed this life just in time. It is well said that a bad stew may be cooked in a good saucepan. Have a care now, my son, watch your words and lie low for a while.”

“ Who disclosed their names ? ” asked Ramiro.

“ Someone, doubtless,” replied the Canon, “ who did not wish to see Spain once again in the throes of rebellion, as in the days of the emperor.”

He then told him, without allowing him an opportunity to put another question, that his majesty’s agents had suspected Don Alonso and that, in the *caballero’s* absence, they had unexpectedly entered his house, turned out every drawer in the place, and taken away with them a large bundle of papers.

“ Where is Don Diego to be executed ? ” Ramiro asked brusquely, his thoughtful glance frozen into immobility by some all-absorbing idea.

“ In the little market-place,” replied the Canon. “ Yesterday he was informed of the sentence, to-day he was to have confessed himself prior to receiving the blessed sacrament, and to-morrow, at midday, they are taking him from the public granary in order to lead him to the scaffold ! It is understood that no noble shall greet him and that, apart from the peasants, who have always taken a greedy delight in such spectacles, the only people who will see him upon his mule will be the lawyers and the representatives of the guilds and confraternities.” When he had heard this bitter speech, Ramiro declared vehemently that if the nobles of Ávila did not bid adieu to Bracamonte when his last moments arrived, they were all base, ignoble knights.

“ Everyone knows,” he exclaimed, “ that Don Diego, not to speak of his ancient and glorious lineage, has always proved himself to be a most honourable gentleman, and that his nobility of soul has undoubtedly

brought upon him this tragic end. For my part, I can say that I shall follow him to the foot of the scaffold without a thought as to my own interests or the justice or injustice of his sentence." He uttered these words with such arrogance that his confessor and teacher thought it necessary to frown and toss his head before replying.

"Do as you like," he said, "but take care that your rash youth does not lead you into paths which you may have, perchance, no wish to tread. Don Diego may be, as you say, a worthy nobleman, although he is of *gabacho*¹ and not Spanish stock. But it is certain that he has now proved himself a traitor to his king."

"Don Diego," replied Ramiro, his face distorted with passion, "is a great gentleman, and could never be disloyal and treacherous as you assert."

"I repeat," replied the Canon angrily, snarling and banging twice upon the table with his fist, "that Don Diego is a coward and a traitor."

"And I say that your grace is lying," shouted Ramiro, mad with rage.

The Canon strode forward, his right hand lifted in readiness to deal a blow; but Ramiro's terrible frown restrained him. Then, stammering out incoherent words, he buried his face in his hands. Those were solemn moments. The irreparable insult seemed to hang upon the air and re-echo in the silence. The Canon muttered, groaned, sighed, covering his face with his hands. At last, allowing them to fall once more to his side, he drew his cloak furiously about him and, after groping for the door along the whole length of the wall, like a blind man, he left the room, banging the door behind him with a savage kick.

Ramiro felt that his mechanical affection for this man had suddenly converted itself into a deadly rancour. The menacing and hostile attitude in which he still

¹ A term applied to the natives of some places at the foot of the Pyrenees. Also used contemptuously of the French.

found himself excited in him fresh impulses of hate towards his victim.

When he felt calmer, he said aloud, as he subsided into his arm-chair:

“ I have no need of him, nor of anyone! ”

II

Few days were fraught with greater melancholy for Ávila than that Monday, the 17th of February, 1592. The city arose from its slumbers in a state of sinister apprehension. The horror of impending martyrdom seemed to permeate the atmosphere, intermingling with the misty haze of morning.

In the centre of the small market-place an immense cube—the scaffold—stood out black against the sky, and fierce gusts of wind from the north beat wildly against the funereal cloth which draped the gaunt structure of pine-wood. Beneath its shadow the administrators of justice, gloomy and forbidding, were pacing gravely to and fro.

At about ten o'clock, the table, the candelabra, and the crucifix were brought, and, shortly afterwards, the executioner's assistants appeared with the block and the two black cushions for the condemned man. A fine, icy drizzle fell at intervals.

The ordinary work of the day had already begun; but the inhabitants strode up and down the streets with an unwonted gravity, trampling underfoot the snow which had fallen during the previous night. Some exchanged mysterious whispers as they met; others argued in the taverns with an unwonted nervousness, avoiding an undue raising of the voice, but snarling from time to time and clutching their virile parts with the whole hand in order to lend additional emphasis to their oaths and execrations.

Their doors and windows tightly closed, the palaces of the nobility looked like mute, pathetic faces. The air was heavy with that horror, that inexpressible disgust, which death at the hands of justice is wont to excite, deadening and stupefying the reason. The whole of Ávila lay under the shadow of infamy, for the proudest of her nobles was about to be executed in the name of the king. If they had razed to the ground the eighty-eight towers which, strangely pale, now seemed to await the fall of that head which harboured all the pride of the city walls, the catastrophe could not have been more appalling.

It was rumoured that at two o'clock in the afternoon Don Diego would be led out from the Alhondiga. This building served as a prison for the nobles, and stood between the Tower of Homage and that of the Alcázar, facing the large market-place. When Ramiro arrived before the emblazoned façade, the officials of the royal and communal justice swarmed and buzzed like flies around the great gate and the fountain; while the confraternities and the members of the religious orders waited in a long queue, which extended from the market to a point well beyond the Convent of Santa María de Gracia. The monks were praying. Their shaven chins were the only features which one could distinguish beneath their drawn hoods. Their rosaries dangled from their hands, folded beneath the long sleeves of their cloaks. All the voices, all the mutterings of Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians, Hieronymists, Theatins, Carmelites, were united in a monotonous chorus, like mournful orisons from another world, serving to augment the general terror. The incessant drizzle settled upon their cloaks in frosty drops, seeming to impregnate everything with its melancholy. A few women were sobbing.

Ramiro spent more than an hour in rubbing shoulders with the crowd. Only the dregs of the city were present, the town quidnuncs, the market women with their

bare arms, the urchins of the quarter, a few peasants from the valley, many *moriscos*, and one or two prostitutes in their yellow cloaks and red stockings.

At length a porter led forth from the hall of the Alhondiga a mule in funereal trappings, with two white-embroidered holes cut into the cloth upon a level with the animal's eyes. The crowd swayed from side to side. Three constables mounted their horses.

Ramiro was glancing around him to see if he could recognise some acquaintance, when a sharp cry broke forth from the multitude, re-echoing against the huge stone wall. Don Diego de Bracamonte had just appeared at the door of the prison. Upon his left walked the Superior of the Barefooted Friars, Brother Antonio de Ulloa.

The first thing to strike the eye was the leaden pallor of his countenance, accentuated by the black hood which they had thrown over his shoulders. His moustache and beard had grown completely white. He strode forward, erect, indomitable, solemn, his eyes raised to heaven, his step determined and severe, like that of one who walks firmly and steadily in the path of honour.

Ramiro shuddered, and when he observed that, as the prisoner mounted the steed of infamy, his hands were pinioned together with a black scarf and that a chain was suspended from his right foot, he felt as though he were ready to sacrifice his life upon the spot in order to liberate that grand old gentleman who had fallen a victim to his stern Castilian pride. He was the last Cid, the last of the champions, dragged to the gallows by low-born, salaried dominies. He closed his eyes for an instant in order to conceal his emotion, and it seemed to him as though he were once more listening to the words of the *hidalgo* at the conspirators' meeting, those words which issued from his lips like steel from the furnace, fulgent and terrible. He would never again roll forth his sounding periods, his right foot upon

the edge of the brazier, his rapier beneath his arm. He was about to die!

The cortège entered the city by the Mercado Grande Gate, proceeded along the street of San Jerónimo, and thence turned into the street of Andrín. The Confraternities of Charity and Pity marched at the head of the procession, jingling their plaintive bells. A harsh, powerful voice chanted at intervals the sentence of death:

“This is the just punishment which the king, our master, orders to be inflicted upon this man, guilty of having publicly exhibited insulting pasquinades directed against the royal majesty. The order has been given that he shall suffer death for this crime.”

Ramiro walked in the same file as Pedro Ronco, the alguazil, who was mounted upon his famous jet-black horse. The friars intoned a lugubrious, terrifying psalm. Like a proud spectre, Bracamonte rode behind them upon the mule. His tragic countenance provoked an outbreak of sobbing among the women at the doors and windows. They invoked St. Catherine, the Holy Martyrs and the Blessed Virgin. The black garments of the alguazils and the tipstaffs diffused throughout the damp air a reek of stale urine. Twelve beggars, each bearing a lighted torch, waited at the door of St. John’s, their prayers trembling like the smoky flames which flared and flickered in the wind.

When they reached the market-place, Don Diego, as he approached the foot of the scaffold, dismounted from the mule and serenely climbed the steps. He knelt down and asked for a book of hours, so that he might confess himself to Friar Antonio. Ramiro, close at hand, heard the recital of the Miserere, the Creed and the Litanies.

A thin drizzle of rain was falling. The crowd covered the whole of the market-place, and, on the west side, some of the more curious had succeeded in scrambling on to the roofs. At last the executioner appeared, to announce that the time was come. The scrivener of

the commission three times exhorted Bracamonte to make public confession of his crime. Ramiro heard him declare that Don Enrique Dávila and Daza Zimbrón, the lawyer, were innocent and that he alone was guilty. The scrivener wished to make him swear to this. Then a firm voice was heard to reply:

“Cease your exhortations, for I shall say no more.”

Then Don Diego stood erect, and his eyes fell on the block upon which he was to be decapitated. He grew terribly pale, but immediately regaining his self-control, he raised his head, and gazed for the last time upon the city, the sky, the precious light of life. All thought that he was about to speak a few words, and a loud insistent murmur demanded silence. Ramiro, for his part, tried to attract his glance in order to say a last farewell; but the spirit of the condemned man, anticipating death, had already soared far above the earth.

At length, as though he had been vouchsafed a sign from Heaven, Don Diego strode forward to receive the black bandage upon his eyes, and seating himself upon the cushion, grasped the block behind him with both hands. Then, settling his head upon the wood, he raised his chin and exposed his throat to the terrible knife.

Ramiro followed with his eyes, as, seized by the hair, it was exhibited, in the king's name, to the four corners of the market-place, that ghastly head so suddenly severed from the body. Then, with a large, magnificent gesture which all could not fail to observe, he took off his cap and shouted:

“May God receive thy soul, most noble knight!”

Two constables overheard his exclamation. One of them wanted to arrest him on the spot; but his companion restrained him. Ramiro left the market-place.

As he passed before the Church of St. John, a lackey handed him a sealed letter. Don Diego de Valderrábano informed him therein that, at six o'clock in the evening, various friends would meet together in his house in order to beg permission from the magistrate to inter

Bracamonte's remains with their own hands. In solemn phrases, Valderrábano invited Ramiro to join them in their request.

That night several *caballeros* in mourning dress crossed the city by torchlight, bearing upon their shoulders a large coffin which they went to deposit in the Chapel of Mosen-Rubí. Valderrábano, as he left the church, put his hand upon Ramiro's shoulder and wept like a child.

III

RAMIRO did not close an eyelid throughout the whole night. Lugubrious visions stole away his sleep, and all the details of the execution, resuscitated by the darkness and the silence, re-enacted themselves before his mind's eye. How fine a thing it was to die so bravely! And yet he, in like circumstances, would have addressed the crowd. Then he proceeded to compose the most extraordinary speeches. But beneath his haughty arrogance a base instinct caused him to reflect upon the power of the monarch, that irresistible, absolute power which could at once dispense the highest honours and deprive the most courageous of their life at one stroke of the pen.

At dawn, when the light of a new day began to steal through the crevices of the shutters, his love for Beatrice burned within him with an intensity such as he had never known before. He thought of her passionately. He thought frenziedly of the supreme joys of life and love, evoking the illusion of a mouth pressed upon his mouth, of silky, scented hair upon his pillow.

His first thought upon rising was to take a walk along the street in which she lived. He reflected that his time during the afternoon would be taken up by the people who visited him every day in order to condole

with him upon the death of Don Íñigo. He must get away as soon as possible. At one o'clock he began to make his toilet. As the servant was at last throwing over his shoulders the lace-embroidered cloak of black velvet, a duenna came in to announce that Beatrice was mounting the stairs, and that as Doña Guiomar was not yet dressed he would have to entertain the visitor.

"Ah! she comes to see *me*!" exclaimed Ramiro to himself; and giving his hair a last touch with the brush, he left the room.

He could only receive her in the old salon, since the other had been dismantled for the money-lenders. He reflected, however, that, in spite of its age and desolation, this room was eloquent of the solemn grandeur and pride of lineage. He raised the latch and entered.

It was a large, narrow room, diversely furnished in the Flemish, Italian and *mudéjar*¹ styles of Charles V's reign. Since the time of Doña Brianda del Águila's decease it had remained closed, like those rooms in Eastern fables which harbour some appalling mystery. Don Íñigo and his daughter had, in their turn, preferred other rooms which were easier to renovate. It was said that the Holy Junta of the Comuneros had, in bygone days, celebrated its clandestine reunions within those walls; and it was an old story among the peasants that the ghosts of the dead men, who themselves opened the shutters, were wont to meet there on moonlight nights. It was on that account, perhaps, that for a quarter of a century no one had cared to live in that house.

The servants were well acquainted with this legend, and their fingers had trembled upon the handles when Doña Guiomar ordered the doors to be opened, that she might watch over the corpse of her father in Doña Brianda's old room.

It was certainly a strange apartment. An ancient blue tapestry hung upon the walls, rotted away at the

¹ Hispano-Mauresque.

top by leakages from the gutters, corroded and mouldy at the edges, like the blistered, tattered leather of the old chests one sees in mortuaries. Upon either side of the room were ranged oaken chairs, inlaid with ivory, *bargueños*, sideboards, desks, so worm-eaten that they resembled the mottled trunk of a cork-tree. A thick coating of grime dimmed the lustre of the bronze, the tortoiseshell, and the mother-of-pearl. Spectral chattels these! The door curtains, the tapestry and all the hangings, laden with cobwebs, seemed but the trappings of a dream. The dust had fallen upon them like light, revealing their ancient folds. As Ramiro entered, he heard a furtive scuttling underneath the furniture. A rat paused in its gnawing.

The balustrade, from which the gilt had been worn by the trembling hands of long-departed gallants, divided the room into two parts and, upon the linoleum-covered dais, cushions still bore the imprint of female forms. An illusory after-taste of ancient gallantries seemed to linger here in this room, like some old perfume, or the scent of those bouquets which old ladies preserve in their toilet boxes.

Dead things! It seemed as though all this worm-eaten garniture was but awaiting the first breath of air from without to vanish suddenly into nothingness.

Six faded portraits, six phantoms, were now the only inhabitants of this room.

Ramiro waited by a brazier, from which the ashes of the last revels had not yet been cleared away. The sound of tiny footsteps and the rustling of silks could be heard in the gallery. Beatrice entered, dressed entirely in black, fragrant as a lighted censer.

While Ramiro made a graceful bow, the girl let her cloak slip back from her shoulders. Doña Alvarez, who had accompanied her, remained in the adjoining room.

“Alone!” said the youth to himself.

They were both trembling. A mysterious emanation from the Unknown vibrated around them. The girl

gazed curiously at the furniture and the hangings, at all that time-worn corruption; then she began to examine the portraits, one by one. Following her glance, and so deeply moved that he felt himself incapable of devising any gallant and witty epigram, Ramiro exclaimed:

“Those are our ancestors—the *Aguilas*, famous men and women who died long ago.”

He paused, and then went on: “We, too, Beatrice, will have to follow them some day!”

And as he uttered these words he gazed passionately into the girl’s eyes, with an expression half melancholy, half sensual.

One of the paintings represented the bust of a woman. A striped hood, drawn over the forehead, completely hid her hair.

“Who would wear such a thing upon her head nowadays! I would rather die!” cried the girl, adding: “Look, she had a beauty spot upon her neck, just like mine!”

And, pulling down her gorget, she revealed her tender throat. The youth was strangely stirred by that smooth, white skin, upon which a tiny spot, like some alluring and voluptuous grain of pepper, whetted his desire.

Suddenly, turning quickly upon her heels as though about to change her step in a dance, Beatrice exclaimed:

“Enough of the dead!”—adding with a courtly smile: “I well know that your blood is of the noblest and that you can tell me wonderful stories of your ancestors: but I should like to hear something about *your* deeds—some day!”

“There is plenty of time for that,” the youth replied, a sudden blush mounting to his cheeks.

“My father,” added Beatrice, “went to the wars as a mere boy. I only tell you this to spur you on.”

“I shall go, I promise you; but let no one think that at the wars I can suffer more than I am suffering here

and now, nor that I can there face greater dangers or experience more terrible captivity or be nearer to death than I am here."

" You become incomprehensible."

" Tell me," exclaimed Ramiro, smiling: " what battle in all the world could be fiercer than my battle for your love, what rampart more formidable than your heart, what infidels more awesome than your eyes, my lady?"

" You pay me very pretty compliments. I wish I could think you were sincere in all you say!"

They relapsed into silence.

They were both dressed in black velvet lined with silk, and their hands and faces alone reflected the dim light of the room. A ray of sunlight, thick with dancing motes, entered through a half-opened shutter, illuminating upon the farthest wall a large tapestry which caught Beatrice's eye.

They walked towards the light, and, as they mounted the *daís*, both made an involuntary grimace. An intolerable stench assailed their nostrils. Ramiro understood. He had just recognised the extraordinary odour which, upon his return from Salamanca, he had detected in Don Iñigo's room. All doubts were dispelled when he saw upon the floor the droppings of wax from the candles.

The tapestry represented an amorous episode. Ramiro had deciphered it some days ago, with the help of a Dominican friar. To the left of the picture could be seen María Padilla, the mistress of Pedro the Cruel, seated in the centre of a fabulous garden, blue and yellow. A peacock spread its gorgeous fan beside a pond or basin and, his right hand resting lightly upon the lady's shoulder, the King of Castile, wearing a cloak of faded red, was showing her a mountain falcon, purple-hooded, which had perched upon his finger. The tapestry seemed to tremble from time to time, as though stirred by some spectral breath.

Ramiro related briefly what he had read in the histories concerning those lovers, and it seemed to him

as though his words exhaled a voluptuous perfume. Beatrice's eyes were shining.

They both gazed intently at the two gallant figures, oblivious of all save the bright scarlet of those lips, unkissing and unkissed, which seemed to prolong throughout the ages the anticipation of that lascivious caress.

Ramiro reflected that someone might come in at any moment, his mother herself, perhaps, and the spell of that *tête-à-tête*, which might not be repeated for some time to come, would be shattered. He cast about in his mind for a decisive phrase, resolved to place his destiny at this woman's feet. He took a few steps towards the wall in order to recover his sang-froid. A corner of the tapestry was turned inwards. Grasping it mechanically, he gave the cloth a sharp twist. Then a very curious thing happened.

Enveloped in a cloud of dust, bewildering, astonishing, an infinitude of tiny moths flew out from under the hangings—a swarm of frightened, hesitating, grey butterflies, like minute flakes of mud, which disseminated a fine, sandy powder as they fluttered about the room, sparkling from time to time like glow-worms in the ray of sunlight.

Many of the insects settled upon Beatrice's dress, fastening themselves upon her corsage and her skirt, covering her mantle. The girl, making repeated gestures of terror and disgust, did not dare to touch them, while Ramiro, half smiling, half abashed, plucked them off, one by one, with his fingers.

Two of the little creatures, caught in a curl of hair, were beating their wings incessantly. The youth, as he leaned forward to catch them, supported Beatrice by passing his arm around her shoulders. The sunbeam fell full upon her face, and amid all that antique corruption, all that putrefaction of dead things which surrounded him, Ramiro's eyes fell upon something bewitching, delicious, pulsating life, youth and hot blood, quivering under his desire. It was that mouth,

Beatrice's red mouth, which the demon of luxury had taught her to moisten slightly, to pout, to pucker, alluringly. Ramiro put his arm around her neck, drawing her gently to him. Then he felt a frenzied desire to fasten his lips upon hers, to drink, to devour the sweets of love, madly, deliriously. And he pressed her to him with passionate violence.

Beatrice screamed:

"Álvarez!"

They both turned their heads. The large, sombre form of the duenna was silhouetted against the lighted embrasure of the door, which had just been opened.

"The moths! the moths!" cried Beatrice once again, shaking her mantle.

The duenna had barely succeeded in removing from her mistress's dress the last trace of the insects when, a moment later, a lackey entered to announce that Doña Guiomar was waiting in her room. Ramiro did not want to accompany Beatrice, for just then a modest diffidence impelled him to avoid his mother's gaze. With a respectful, silent bow he disappeared along the corridor.

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That afternoon, that night, and during all the days which followed, Ramiro's thoughts continued to dwell upon the *tête-à-tête* in the old room.

Swayed by the tyranny of passion, his pride knew no bounds. Undisturbed by the slightest doubt as to his capabilities, untroubled by a single thought of failure, he felt surer of himself than he had ever felt before. With that cry Beatrice had declared the unconditional surrender of her will. He had felt her tremble in his arms, just as the Saracen girl and other women had trembled when he had drawn them to his kiss; and he fancied that he could still feel upon his palm the mad throbbing of her heart beneath the stiff, jet-embroidered corsage.

Nevertheless, he also had been wounded by Beatrice,

and perhaps the wound would never heal. Life without the love, the total possession of this girl now seemed inconceivable to him. Of what use to dream, to have ambitions, to torture himself, if he could never obtain that supreme caress which had just escaped his passionate desire? What was the world and all its glory without that victory? How could he bear another man to . . . ?

His amorous fancy alternated between ecstasy and impure lust. At times his soul would enjoy in one moment of rapture the infinite bliss of ideal love; at others his blood cried out impatiently for the supreme embrace. Now he would fancy that his lips were sipping ecstasy, like a divine nectar, upon the lips of his beloved; now that his desires were like dreadful bees, swarming greedily upon an open fruit.

Then he would dream of what he would do, when he became her husband, in order to protect her from the exasperating sensuality of those who would have liked to be her lovers. He would take her away to some far country, to some desert island: or he would shut himself up with her in some dungeon to which the only mode of entry was a door with iron bars, allowing her to go out to the nearest church only very early in the morning, wearing a large, thick cloak which hid her whole face, and only permitted to others the glimpse of her fleeting, muffled shadow. If anyone should dare to woo her with fine words as she passed by or, with brazen effrontery, venture to follow her, he would know how to despatch him to the next world by the speediest of all posts, with a large, scarlet seal upon his breast.

One night, as he lay in bed, he fell asleep without extinguishing the lamp, and his visions were gilded by its flame. Now a captain of guards, in some part of America, he was married to Beatrice. He discovered an immense treasure, hundreds upon hundreds of sepulchral urns filled to the brim with gold. He saved the army in a terrible surprise attack. Alone and unaided, he won many battles. He was made viceroy. . . .

The next day an alguazil of the Holy Office delivered into his hands a parchment, which summoned him, for the second time, to give evidence in the trial of the *moriscos*.

IV

CAME days during which Don Alonso Blázquez Serrano fancied that the Evil One was lying in wait for him with all the wiles and stratagems described by theologians. His bright and lively spirit was plunged into the blackest melancholy. He was haunted incessantly by an unwholesome fear; his eloquence gave way to an extreme taciturnity; his old haughtiness to a profound conviction of his own depravity; his exalted love of life to a complete renunciation of all joys, all triumphs.

Along what path beset with snares had he turned his steps? What sinister stairway had he, in his old age, begun to descend? The stars in their courses fought against him, and he would liken himself to the wretched Laocoön, throttled by the serpent.

“Why, O Lord, why?” he would cry at times, raising his eyes to heaven as though to protest against the divine wrath.

In his moments of contrition, however, he would accuse himself of all kinds of imaginary and deadly sins. When he recalled the pagan orgies of former years, his old seductive wiles, his love of wealth and circumstance, his unbridled vanity, he came to regard himself as a hardened sinner, a wretched soul cast into the outer darkness, stained by crimes of every description.

Adversity had waited until his declining years to set its seal upon him; and, over and above the miseries of bankruptcy, the material world itself seemed to have grown inimical to him and all his works. Even familiar objects seemed to have fallen under some fearful spell; a motionless curtain, a black scarf, an old family portrait,

a mirror, a dagger, appeared to diffuse an atmosphere of hostility, pregnant with madness and fear. It was as though certain objects were trying to prognosticate some terrible fate which lay in store for him.

Then he would become more devout than ever, redoubling his penances, devising hair-shirts and savage disciplines of more than usual barbarity, muttering incessant prayers. His spirit, revolted by things mundane, now sought consolation in dreams of the life to come; but even the latter was big with uncertainty concerning the destiny of his soul, his salvation! The idea of eternal punishment would plunge him into a maelstrom of thought wherein his mind became rapidly submerged. Jesus and the Virgin, however, were now for him no longer the resplendent figures of the Italian paintings, but tall, pallid spectres, bathed in a purgatorial sweat, whose eyes seemed fixed in an endless contemplation of the tortures of the damned.

This philosophic gentleman who had always ridiculed base fears, and whose daily round of perilous adventure had acted as a spur to further deeds of valour, now bowed his head in abject terror, trembling before a mere nothing, a vision, a shade. He suffered most acutely at nightfall. When throughout the gloomy chambers the waning light of dusk trembled to its death, he was consumed with an inexplicable dread. At times images of scaffolds, stakes, or mortuary urns rose up before him in the shadow. Then he would call loudly for the servants, and ordering them to close the shutters he would cause innumerable candelabra to be lighted upon the tables, the desks, all the pieces of furniture in the apartment, candelabra brought from every room in the house. But even in that dazzling blaze of light, that glare of waxen tapers, he would be seen to grow pale with fear, striking his forehead with his clenched fist, as though he wished to shatter and expel some fearful vision.

His grief was certainly not unfounded. Disappoint-

ments at court were the prelude to his misfortune. Don Alonso, at the time when Antonio Pérez enjoyed the royal favour, had given many banquets and hunting parties in that courtier's honour—eventually obtaining from his own lips a voluntary promise that he would, at the earliest opportunity, procure for him, Don Alonso, a seat on the Council of Italy. Then, after the favourite's disastrous fall, and even after his flight, the Avilian gentleman, faithful to his code of honour, was perhaps the only courtier who ventured to speak a word in his defence. That was enough. A mysterious sign was vouchsafed from above. He was subjected to all kinds of humiliation, relegated to the last place on all ceremonial occasions, shamed in the presence of the ladies of the court. His petitions were thrown to the flames of the braziers. Certain ecclesiastics would quietly approach him and put before him, as though to pass an idle hour, problems of theology which verged upon heresy. He was lost. Terror fell upon that hidalgo who thought he knew not the meaning of fear, a supernatural horror which mocked all human valour. The royal hatred had fallen upon him—the “evil eye” of the king.

His upright, manly bearing grew bent and sullen. The colour departed from his cheeks and his old enemy, the quartan ague, attacked him once again.

At this period of his life an artist, El Greco by name, painted his portrait. A strange picture, which revealed the secret of the man's inmost soul more clearly than did his own countenance, as though the artist had dipped his brush into the very essence of resentment, melancholy and pride. A tall ruff encircled the pathetic, shrivelled face. One saw how the smouldering fires of passion were withering the flesh upon the bones, infecting and envenoming the humours of the blood. The iris and the pupil, veinous and jaundiced, seemed to swim in a greenish fluid, continually renewing itself, as though one met the gaze of a living eye. The mouth was distorted under the moustaches, as though it were

striving to repress some haughty insult; the stiff mask of a courtier, half concealing righteous anger and stifled passion.

At the same time, a mystic peace and the light of religious faith seemed to envelop the figure, giving to the picture its characteristic tone.

When Don Alonso, weary of the court and conscious of approaching old age, decided to seek refuge in his own mansion, there to divide the years which remained to him between his love for his daughter and the tranquil enjoyment of the precious things which he had accumulated in his magnificent galleries, fresh disasters, each more violent and unexpected than the last, came to surprise him in his retreat, endangering his honour, his liberty, his lineage, and all the happiness which remained to him on earth.

Don Alonso loved Beatrice with the blind and indulgent love of an old man of fashion. The only education he had given her consisted in yielding to her every whim, in following with a doting tenderness all the capricious dictates of her erratic little soul. A fond touch of those elfin fingers, a well-timed sigh, were sufficient to cause the old gentleman to view the most extravagant exactions in the light of eminently reasonable demands. He fancied that by means of this pernicious acquiescence he could add to his own affection for the child the love of her dead mother, who, in giving birth to Beatrice, had sacrificed her own life.

She had dancing masters, singing masters, teachers of the viol, every accomplishment, in fine, which can be acquired without trouble was hers—all those things which can eventually add a new libation to the intoxicating cup of youth. The idea of forcing that little brown angel into any kind of painful effort horrified him. At fifteen the child was scarcely able to spell. She did not know how to use a needle. Her entourage of duennas served rather as a ceremonial adornment than a bodyguard, and as her father spent so much of his

time at court, Beatrice, like a capricious Infanta, ruled the house according to her own sweet will. Doña Álvarez, however, who had learned her trade in the best houses in Madrid, was wont, when strangers were present, to scold her severely—reproofs to which the girl would listen with a grimace of feigned annoyance, for she knew that all this merely served to exhibit her as a precious jewel, an exquisite, delicate creature to be guarded with the most scrupulous care. In this way, after so wise and so careful an initiation, did Beatrice begin to fulfil her mission upon earth: to laugh, to dress delightfully, to dance with ever greater nimbleness, to scatter with each twirl of her skirt the seeds of enchantment. At length she issued from the crucible, the very quintessence of grace, courtliness and charm. Anything which might have rendered her dull or stale to a lover was purged from her tiny body; only that remained which was vivacious, clear-cut, subtle and piquant, the essence of spices, the perfumed clove capable of rendering fragrant innumerable desires.

In spite of his jealous devotion to his daughter, Don Alonso wished to marry her as soon as possible to some youth capable of maintaining the lustre of her name. Ramiro attracted him more than any other—for the precocious dignity, the haughty bearing and speech of that descendant of a noble line seemed to foreshadow the most heroic destiny. He had also remarked that whenever Ramiro's name was mentioned in Beatrice's presence the girl's cheeks were suffused with a sudden blush. In order that the fulfilment of his plan might not be endangered, he had only once taken her to court, and he also endeavoured to keep the brothers San Vicente at a safe distance, for their familiarity was bound to excite in Ramiro's mind a perpetual misgiving. So he ordered Doña Álvarez to inform Gonzalo or Pedro, whenever they might call during his absence, that Beatrice could not receive them while her father was away at court.

The younger brother was the first to arrive. When he heard the message he thought that it was an invention of the servants and, as he had just left a tavern, tried to force an entry, threatening to make a way for himself with his sword. The porters, however, ready to die upon the threshold rather than let him pass, proved invincible.

Gonzalo, in his turn, adopted a safer method—the suborning of Doña Alvarez. As *reals* succeeded *sous* and doubloons *reals*, the duenna, like a well-greased leather strap, grew more and more pliable, until at length, in the very toilet chamber of his mistress, the youth could boast of another Celestina of prodigious and unlimited resources.

The story of this outrage was soon bruited abroad throughout the city, and it provoked a violent, mutual detestation between the two families. Doña Urraca took upon herself the task of avenging it. The favour which her husband enjoyed at court, together with his position as Commissioner of the Holy Office, would prove in time to be weapons more than adequate wherewith to humble her relation's arrogance.

One summer night, at about this time, Don Alonso found a mysterious paper upon his desk. He questioned the servants and the duennas, but no one knew anything about it. The communication, which bore no signature, informed him that Ramiro was the son of a Moor. He laughed at this ridiculous tale, and, as he tore the paper into fragments, he recalled the previous calumnies which had been circulated concerning the youth's complicity in the attempted revolt of the *moriscos*. Months passed by. At length, a few days before Don Iñigo's death, he again received a letter in which he was informed that Ramiro was the son of Doña Guiomar de la Hoz and a Moor of Cordova, and that if he would come to a certain place, at a certain time, upon a certain day, the whole story of the youth's birth would be revealed to him.

Don Alonso set out for the rendezvous accompanied by a single lackey. It was a mound not far distant from the Convent of the Incarnation, where the rippling of a brook mitigates the harshness of the surrounding landscape. Just as he was beginning to fancy himself the victim of some trick, a stunted, shrivelled little man appeared from behind a green oak. It was Diego Franco, the bell-ringer of the cathedral. Cap in hand, and peering around him with his small, bright eyes, he repeated the tale which Medrano, in a bout of drunkenness, had told him up in the tower. He swore by all the saints in the calendar, supporting his story with the most circumstantial evidence, affirming that when Doña Guiomar had married the *caballero* Lope de Alcántara she was already pregnant by the Moor.

Only then, connecting this tale with certain facts which he had observed in Don Iñigo's house without attaching much importance to them, did Don Alonso conceive his first suspicion. He recalled the mysterious arrival of father and daughter, who had never again returned to their house in Segovia; the birth of Ramiro at Ávila a few months later; the claustral existence which they had led for some years; the continual melancholy of Doña Guiomar; the small affection which the old man manifested towards his grandchild; the silence which surrounded the memory of this Lope de Alcántara, who, nevertheless, had died so gloriously for his king. This assertion seemed probable enough. What was he to do? There was only one way of arriving at the truth—to ask Don Iñigo personally. But his old friend was on the point of death. No matter, he said to himself, and, that very afternoon, he went to visit the dying man.

The old hidalgo lay stiff and motionless upon his pillow. As he was expected to die at any moment, they had clothed him in the white mantle which the Order of Santiago prescribes for the supreme event. His head lay upon the same cushion of green leather which

had supported his wife, Doña Brianda, when she drew her last breath.

Don Alonso begged that they might be left alone. When everyone had retired, the eyes of the dying man fell sadly upon his friend. Then Blázquez Serrano prayed that he might be pardoned for breaking in upon those moments of salutary meditation. He had called with reference to a very serious matter, and he wished to exact the supreme proof of the friendship which had always united them.

“ You are departing,” he exclaimed, “ but I remain, and your word alone can render me the service of which I am now in such dire need.” Then he declared his wish that Ramiro and Beatrice should marry, revealing also the denunciation which had been made to him.

“ I suspect that your grandson is the victim of some treacherous calumny; but if this is not the case,” added Don Alonso, gazing intently into the old man’s eyes, and speaking in intimate tones—“ if such is not the case, you, my old friend, would not wish that such a calamity should also fall upon my house. In the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ, tell me, here, alone, now that no one can overhear us: Is it true? ”

Don Iñigo appeared to have heard not a word, as though his spirit were floating in some far distant region; but suddenly in his great eyes, from which life was slowly ebbing like the last shadow upon a sad, still pool, there welled up abundant humours, a very flood of tears. Shortly afterwards, he half opened his lips and uttered a single syllable, pronounced with violent emphasis, as though by some invisible being, a syllable which re-echoed in the silence like a sigh for all the sorrows of the world.

“ Yes,” said Don Iñigo. A spectral, melancholy “ yes,” a long, unearthly “ yes,” the last breath, the last bubble from that soul which was now sinking for ever into the ocean of eternity.

A few days later, the seditious pasquinades were exhibited in Ávila, and although Don Alonso, admonished and cautioned by Don Diego himself, had left that evening for the court, Philip de San Vicente and his wife, in the course of an after-dinner conversation, had mentioned his name to Doctor Pareja de Peralta, the commissioner sent by the king from court. Blázquez Serrano's intimacy with the guilty parties lent some colour of truth to the denunciation; it was enough to represent him as one of those hypocritical vassals who give to the monarch their smiles and to the rebels their hearts, who contrive to be present at court just at the moment when the mine which they have themselves helped to lay is on the point of exploding.

A letter from his majordomo was the first warning to reach him of what had taken place. Don Alonso learned from this letter that, on the afternoon of 21st October, a group of law officers had invaded his mansion, ransacking the rooms, overturning the contents of all the cupboards and chests, forcing the drawers of all the desks, retiring at length with a large bundle of papers and an amethyst seal engraved with the Bracamonte arms. He, aided by the other servants, had endeavoured to resist the intruders, but the constable, in the name of the royal majesty, had threatened them with the gallows.

Don Alonso decided to return to Ávila at the earliest possible moment, in order to ease his daughter's mind and dam the flood of calumny. The plot had been skilfully woven, and although the confiscated documents themselves proved his innocence, the words and the facts were distorted from their true sense by means of legal sophistries. At length, the magnanimous intervention of the Prior of St. Thomas dragged him from the edge of the abyss and the proceedings were quashed.

A few days, however, after the execution of Bracamonte, and not without informing the chief magistrate of his intention, Don Alonso left for Madrid in order to

seek the protection of his friend the Count of Chinchón and throw himself at the feet of the monarch in protestation of his innocence.

Philip II was still at the Escorial, and Don Alonso continued his journey armed with a letter from the count. On the way, reclining upon the cushions of his carriage, he thought out a dramatic speech, by means of which he fondly hoped to touch the monarch's heart. He rehearsed the gestures, the tone of voice, appropriate to the occasion, changing a word here, recasting a phrase there. Full of confidence, he complimented himself upon the discovery of a wittier epithet, a more elegant hyperbole.

Two days elapsed before he succeeded in obtaining an audience. He was ushered in by the first groom-in-waiting.

The king was in the antechamber of his cell, and the adjoining corridors swarmed with gowned figures, friars, clerics, courtiers; a symphony in brown and gray, which rose and fell in a still and solemn cadence.

The autumn sunlight poured into the monkish cell which served as audience chamber for the ambassadors. As Don Alonso entered, a stale odour of drugs and unguents assailed his nostrils. Two desks, laden with papers, stood at the far end of the apartment. At one of these Rodrigo Vásquez sat working; at the other a black-bearded, hirsute little man whom Don Alonso did not recognise. Friar Diego de Chaves, for it was he, went up to one of the windows and began to gaze out over the country.

The most powerful monarch in the world, the taciturn King of Scribblers, was seated upon a monkish chair, his leg outstretched upon a stool, his elbow supported upon a rough oaken table, annotating, one after another, enormous piles of documents. Standing at his right, Santoy, his aide-de-chambre, took the sheets of paper and, while they were yet damp, sprinkled them with fine sand.

Philip II must have been seriously ill. His skin was the dull white colour of damp plaster. No sound other than that of the incessant scratching of pens upon paper could be heard in the room.

Outside, the air was clear and brilliant. The blue sky glistened like wet enamel above the austere and rocky countryside. The king raised his head from time to time in meditation, and the light which entered through the window panes deprived his steely, snake-like eyes of all colour.

Don Alonso waited by the door and, in order to collect himself, allowed his eyes to wander from time to time towards a strange mural painting: a mad, phantasmal zodiac, full of condemned souls and demons.

This monarch had no need of regal pomp and circumstance. When the time came to kneel at his feet and deliver into his hands the count's letter, Don Alonso was trembling from head to foot. The king gave it a perfunctory glance. Then, his lips blue with cold, his mouth tightly set, as though he were already tasting the bitter dregs of all mundane glory, he uttered, scarcely moving his lips, the following barely audible words:

"If you had proved yourself to be so loyal a vassal as the count assures me you are," he said, "you might well have warned us of the cowardly treason which was being hatched under your very eyes."

Don Alonso then tried to utter the phrases which he had so carefully stored up in his mind; but his eyes met those of the king and, his intelligence suddenly paralysed, he could only hit upon inopportune, disconnected, useless words:

"Your majesty must not think . . . I could never dream . . . I am entirely innocent! . . ."

The king checked him with a frown, and his lips moved once again. But this time no one, even though they had put their ears to his mouth, could have distinguished a single word. It sounded like the monotonous droning of some insect, the same low,

incomprehensible gabbling which exasperated the envoys from other sovereigns.

At length the hand which idly toyed with the golden chain of the Fleece, a hand white as that of a corpse, was raised and pointed towards the door; and, as Don Alonso hesitated, the royal gesture was emphasised with a peremptory movement of the forefinger. Any reply would have proved fatal. The *caballero* obeyed.

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When Blázquez Serrano found himself once again alone in his carriage, on the road to Ávila, he felt the flame of honour rekindle in his veins. He did not wish to allow his mind to dwell continually upon the enormity of the outrage to which he had been subjected, and concentrated upon devising some scheme to avenge it. He thought with envious admiration of his friend Antonio Pérez; he thought of flying, as he had done, to some foreign court whence he would hurl against the monarch the hissing arrows of his rancour. Thus would he add to his name an unfading lustre, and his honour, justly avenged, would equal in greatness the might of the king. As this idea formulated itself in his mind, an illusory way of escape seemed to open out before him, and his eyes gazed once more upon the superhuman figure of Philip II, who seemed to watch him closely as he pursued his journey along the roads. All his energy left him. He felt annihilated, crushed completely, by something irresistible, some powerful, magic spell. Now indeed was he tasting the bitter dregs of courtly ambition. He was seized with a frenzied longing to leave the world and all its works, to consecrate his remaining years of life to the service of God, within the four walls of a cell.

Upon the following day, as they approached Ávila, he ordered the driver to take him to the Monastery of St. Thomas. He wished to have a word with the prior in passing.

It was a fresh, radiant afternoon towards the end of

October. The Moorish muleteers were dozing by the wayside, flat upon their backs, as though felled to the ground by some assassin, their round earthen pitchers beside them. The rust-red walls and mighty towers of the city were glutted with sunshine. The whole city lay wrapped in a stern, resplendent silence, and Don Alonso recalled the lines of Dante:

Loco e in Inferno detto Malebolge,
Tutto di pietra e di color ferrigno,
Come la cerchia che d'intorno il volge.

Crossing the Court of Silence, he went straight to his friend's cell and gently opened the door. The monk was sleeping, lying full length upon a rough couch. His lips were parted in a blissful smile. One of his legs was hanging over the side of the bed and his slipper, dangling from his toes, grazed the tiles. Blázquez Serrano, before awaking him, stood for a few moments wrapped in envious admiration.

He left the monastery an hour later, fully decided to take orders.

He wished to enter his house by the door which opened on to the courtyard at the back, and cautiously mounting the stairs, passed through the library, putting a finger to his lips as the servants came forward to receive him.

What a deep feeling of disgust now animated him as he contemplated those vast halls in which, with a persevering obstinacy, he had accumulated so many precious objects, collected by him upon his travels with such infinite care! Oh, unprofitable vanities! How much useless effort, how much blind zeal, how much puerile infatuation did those trifles represent when regarded in the light of stark reality! Why, oh why, had so much energy been squandered upon the painting and carving of wood and ivory, the convolution of molten glass, the incrustation of damascenes, when death was the end of all!

And what of the luxury of the salons, the magnificence of the hangings, the pomp of the liveries?

Ah! for so many years had truth been hidden from

him! But now, at least, he saw it before his eyes, as though inscribed upon the wall in letters of fire: let one cast off as soon as possible the burden of riches, embarking upon the quest of peace, humility, a spiritual retreat far removed from worldly intrigues, far from faces distorted by hate and greed, concentrating all the forces of one's soul upon the supreme task of earning salvation! He was already an old man, and had nothing to offer the Lord save a long life of crime and the fatal, unsubstantial pomps of vanity!

He had seated himself upon an arm-chair in the library to wait there until they had prepared his bed.

“There is still a remedy,” he said to himself, and rose brusquely from his seat in order to summon his confessor and consult him without delay concerning his recent decision to take orders. But as he approached the door, he heard the sound of a melodious, youthful voice singing to the accompaniment of a rebeck. His lips parted in astonishment. It was his daughter!

Crossing room after room, he drew near to her apartment. The door was ajar, but Don Alonso could only distinguish the duenna who, seated upon a cushion, was nodding her head in time with the music, her eyes half closed. Beatrice was singing:

Chance brought you and me together,
Love ordained that I should love you,
Absence, hiding your face from me,
Willed I should not die of loving.
Chance ordained it, chance decreed it,
For it was by chance I met you,
And it was by chance I loved you,
And misfortune 'twas to love you.

From my present mortal sufferings
Comes a veritable anguish;
All their gestures are but signals
Of the cruel fate that waits me.
Chance ordains it, chance decrees it,
That my present mortal anguish
Herald agony far sharper!

As the last notes of that old Castilian song died away, Doña Álvarez exclaimed: "Oh, little Easter of flowers, little sugar angel! Would I were your lover to lie at your feet and hear that sweet music, that voice, so charming that one weeps with joy to hear it! I know someone who would give the apple of his eye just to have heard you then, *señora mia*."

"You mean—Ramiro?" asked the girl.

"Don't talk to me of that nightmare—green as an olive, arrogant and pompous as a king in the puppet show! I wouldn't have him—I a widow, and turned fifty at that! No, I mean someone quite different—fair as an angel and the most charming of gallants. Ah, would I were your age that I might let him have his way with me!"

"What is the latest present from the *regidor*? A shawl, a ring, some dainty trifle?"

"I—a go-between! As God hears me, I have never let one drop of oil sully these proud palms!"

"True, Don Gonzalo is a pretty youth," mused Beatrice, a pensive finger on her cheek.

Then, holding herself gracefully erect, she cried:

"I do not know, Álvarez, what is passing in my heart. Sometimes I feel as though I could think of no one but Ramiro—I feel as though some spell had been cast upon me. Ah! how I am torn with jealousy then! I am jealous of I know not whom—madly jealous of all the rooms, all the windows—and even of the fountain in the square, with its water-girls. 'Might he not have be-sprinkled my dress or my hair with some magic powder that day when the moths flew out of the tapestry?'

"It is more than likely, for he is fond enough of the Moorish girls in the quarter, and they will have certainly taught him all their accursed tricks—how to mix philtres, cast the evil eye, and make charms and amulets."

"You are an old bitch—as Leocadia says."

"A plague upon her for a saucy hussy!"

"At other times, at night, when I am in bed, Álvarez,

I am afraid to think of Ramiro. I fancy that he is coming to kill me, that he is hiding in some corner of my room, moving the curtains, making the chests creak, and the next morning I am pleased when you talk to me of Gonzalo. He is indeed a handsome fellow, the *regidor*. He has loved me since I was *so* high—and, oh! how love-sick he is—how graceful, how delicate! But my father tells me that the San Vicente lineage is not worth two beans."

"Perhaps he does," interrupted the duenna, "but I remember having heard the canon, Miguel de la Higuera, a great expert in such matters, say that the San Vicentes were of a very ancient house, which led many battles against the Moors, and that they are descended from a certain Maria de la Cerda and can boast of two Constables of Castile, and their family arms are emblazoned upon the stalls of the Capilla Mayor de San Vicente, here in this very town. Does not Gonzalo's bearing declare the nobility of his race? Was there ever a more courteous, a more gallant youth than he? Who more skilful in arms, who can dance or play as he does? He is beautiful as Narcissus, valiant as Achilles; in music, an Orpheus; and how patient, how constant in love! Upon my faith, my lady, if, one of these nights, you do not let him speak with you, just once, you will kill by your harshness the noblest gallant that mortals have ever set eyes upon!"

"I could not do that without endangering my honour," replied Beatrice in timid haste. Then, as though putting the thought aside, she went on:

"Assuredly Gonzalo is madly in love with me. The more relentless I am, the more he seems to desire me. I love him, I really love him, Alvarez. As for Ramiro, he grows tender and angry by turns: to-day he is as sweet as honey, to-morrow as sour as vinegar. And no one more arrogant than he! I ought to think no more about him, and bestow my hand upon the *regidor*. Yet no sooner do I close my eyes than I picture him again in my mind—with his pale, handsome face, his

cloak raised up behind by the point of his sword, and the great black plume he wears," she added, with a flourish of her hand about her head.

"I never mistake his footstep in the street, when I run to the window. His spurs clank upon the cobbles—tick, tick, tick—and sometimes his sword clatters against the wall—tock, tock, tock. . . . My father says that Ramiro is a descendant of one of the noblest and most ancient families in Castile."

"Tick, tick, tick—tock, tock, tock . . ." mocked the duenna.

"As a Bachelor I will have none of him. But if he should soon return from some war—with a captain's lance! . . ."

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Not a word of this dialogue escaped Don Alonso's ears. On one occasion, he felt impelled to enter the room and intervene frankly in the conversation; but fear lest his daughter should think him guilty of eavesdropping restrained him.

On that same evening, he summoned Beatrice to him and, engaging her to keep the matter secret, told her in a few discreet words the whole story of Ramiro's birth. Then, alluding to the youth's pretensions as a lover, he concluded, his hand raised above his head, his voice tremulous and solemn:

"Rather die, my daughter, rather die than sully our pure and noble blood with the blood of the Moors!"

V

OUTSIDE, the city lies wrapped in the mournful silence of a Castilian siesta. The noonday sun blazes angrily down upon the stony walls, heating the ironwork, scorching the mossy roofs. The streets are silent and

deserted; but, at infrequent intervals, the harsh voice of some Moorish hawker of vegetables profanes the monastic calm, causing more than one hidalgo, dozing in the shade of his room, to grunt and groan uneasily. The cocks are crowing hoarsely, sleepily.

Ramiro paces up and down the dilapidated room.

What has happened?

Upon the walls, now bare, long streaks of dust mark the places once occupied by tapestries, and here and there strips and strands of blue velvet are still hanging from the nails. It seems as though an invading army of barbarians has torn down, in a frenzy of pillage, all the trappings and curtains, smashing every tile upon the floor as they rolled up the carpets and carried off the furniture, leaving behind them only a Florentine table of ebony inlaid with ivory, and an oaken chair.

The apartment looks like a granary after the harvest has been sold, and its habitual odour of age and must is rendered more pungent by the work of devastation. The old family portraits of the Águilas have, however, been hung once more upon the walls.

Ramiro is wrapped in meditation. Two heavy furrows mark the space between his eyebrows. His face is thinner, his forehead paler, his nose sharper, more aquiline; but he is dressed as sumptuously as ever. A gorgeous chain glitters upon his suit of black corded silk. Golden spurs jingle at his heels. The funereal cloak of Segovian cloth lies carefully folded over the back of a chair.

His life has suddenly been whirled into the heart of a maelstrom, and his will, like some fierce torrent, bursts into foam as it dashes against the rocks.

How could he doubt it? They were trying to break his spirit, to cover him with infamy. Some—such as the chief magistrate and the Inquisitors—in order to punish him for having raised his cap before the severed head of Bracamonte; others, like San Vicente and the lieutenant, because they were furiously jealous of him; the

rest because of their envious fear lest he should win the highest renown. How could he explain otherwise this insistent accusation concerning his alliance with the *moriscos*? Who could ever seriously imagine that a man of his race would be capable of so heinous a crime against God, against the kingdom, against his own honour?

In the meanwhile he consoled himself by recalling the contemptuous gesture which had been his answer to the captious questionings of the tribunal. He would have liked it to be his final and only reply, to have uttered not a single word in addition, gazing haughtily upon them from the lofty peak of his pride; but when Quiroga, the censor, pointed with a malicious look to the Saracen dagger which had been found in the drawer of his writing desk, he was obliged to tell the whole story of his adventure from the beginning, giving the reasons for his liaison with Aixa, describing the struggle, the care with which the women and the *morisco* had tended him, explaining, finally, how that present, which he treasured as a precious memento of his exploits, had come into his possession.

He was, however, unable to produce a single witness: but Aixa, the infidel, his own victim, rendered almost insane by torture, instead of taking the vengeance, so easy and so terrible, which offered itself to her, confirmed at once his story and his innocence, calling him a perfidious Christian and a disloyal knight, who had not known how to keep his plighted word. Fortunately the judges were unable to understand the meaning of the last anguished, passionate glance which the Saracen girl cast at him as she was again dragged to the torture.

Then it was the Canon's turn to testify, and Ramiro was not troubled again.

Now he was free; but who could ever clear his honour of the foul stain of such a calumny! Ah! so perfidious an injury as that demanded in return a secret vengeance! He thought of Gonzalo, and, as though his sword were a living part of his body, he seemed to feel along the steel

within its hilt a homicidal shudder, a savage rejoicing in bloodshed and in death.

He halted in his pacing for a moment, and went towards one of the windows. The immutable panorama which, from the days of his childhood, he had so often contemplated, now took on for him an entirely different meaning. The silent city, enclosed within its high, turreted walls, which shut out from view the whole of the horizon: the stern arrogance of the mansions, evoking names so frequently pronounced, with all their tangle of hates and envies and deceits; the vulgar, daily round of that communal life which every detail of the landscape brought before his mind, and, in fine, so much baseness, so much monotony, rose up before his eyes as though to bring home to him the smallness of the prison which had heretofore proved an adequate field for his ardour.

He remembered once again Beatrice's words to him in the salon. Yes! the time had come for him to leave his perch and soar away upon some heroic chase. He realised that it would not be fitting to unite his name with that of this daughter of illustrious captains, without first offering her some banner from a Moorish ship, or some mural garland, snatched during the siege of a Flanders town.

What had he accomplished up to the present which deserved to be recorded in the *Chronicles*? His most heroic exploits—had they been more than juvenile feats? Reflecting thus, he smiled with an ambitious acrimony, and his eyes, attacked by a sudden smarting, let fall a tear. He made up his mind, then and there, to go to Cartagena, in order to see if he could still find Antonio de Quiñones, the captain. Who could say that they might not soon come across some Turkish fleet!

He was disposed to roam the world incessantly, until at last he brought to a successful conclusion some enterprise which would win for him universal renown. Nothing now fettered his will. Now he was free, his own master;

his mother had turned her back upon the world two months previously, entering the Convent of St. Joseph, and she had just been sent, together with other novices, to a house of the Order, in the city of Cordova. He seated himself at the table.

The cathedral bell tolled gently, three times.

“Three o’clock,” he said to himself, “and the page has not yet arrived with the luncheon.” Then he remembered that he had been unable to give the boy a single penny, for he had expended the whole remaining contents of his purse upon the diamond necklace for Beatrice. Would those dogs of Genoese keep their word and bring him the hundred and fifty ducats? Last night he had retired without eating a single morsel since morning; and as for the previous days—if it had not been for the ham and cabbages which Casilda had brought him! . . .

Another day without food! He would offer up this fresh penance to the Lord. Hunger was holy!

The door suddenly opened, and Pablillos, dressed in an old suit, the colour of sheepskin, entered the room at one bound, holding in his arms a basket brimful of French beans, turnips, onions, sausages and calves’ feet, the lifeless head of a quail dangling over the side.

“How did you get hold of all these victuals, boy?” Ramiro asked him dryly, suspecting some roguery.

“Guided, sire, by the three theological virtues of hunger—to wit, cunning, audacity, and nimbleness,” the rascal replied, mimicking the grave tones of a scholar.

At that moment a gentle knocking upon the street door resounded through the house.

“The Genoese,” cried Ramiro; “run and let them in, Pablillos. It can only be they who knock so quietly at this hour.”

“And while your grace is receiving these dogs, I will cook these gifts from our rotund mother,” replied Pablillos; and he went out by way of the gallery, balancing the basket upon his head.

He was the son of a midwife of Cadiz and a famous actor of Zámora. Ramiro had taken him into his service at Salamanca. One afternoon, as he was crossing the long bridge over the river Tormes, he had seen the boy basking in the sun, his back against the parapet, his arms akimbo, his eyes gazing up into heaven, as though he hoped, like another St. Paul, to see a raven fly down from the clouds with the miraculous crust in his beak. He looked a stout fellow, and had the making of a page in him.

“Seekest thou a master, boy?” Ramiro had asked him.

His eyes flashed, and removing his cap, he came forward with short sharp steps, cringing and crouching like a stray dog.

From that time forward, in a lackey’s uniform, he acted as Ramiro’s servant, following with him the university courses—for he was a bright lad. Ramiro became greatly attached to him on account of the cynical smartness with which he overcame or avoided the most trying obstacles, and now, when he was dismissing his whole staff, he would have liked to keep Pablillos, who, together with the steward and Casilda, were his last and only stays in these days of misfortune. The sound of footsteps could be heard along the gallery. Someone rapped upon the door with his knuckles.

“Come in,” said Ramiro.

And the Genoese entered the room.

They were two money-lenders from the old Jewish quarter of Santa Escolástica. One of them was quite young; his hair cropped closely to his forehead; his features childlike; his belly round and fat as a hangman’s. The other was old; his eyes beery; his nose rapacious; his neck red and wrinkled like a turkey’s. The first wore coral ear-rings; the second, a number of rings set with the imitation jewels which are manufactured in Venice by the *margaritaios*.¹

¹ Vendors of imitation pearls.

The old man handed him a leather sack, swollen with coins, saying:

“Your grace can count them. There are one hundred and fifty.”

“There is no need for that,” replied Ramiro, taking the bag.

“Your grace is aware,” went on the old man, “that he will have to leave the palace on the last day of the present year?”

“Yes,” replied Ramiro dryly, folding his arms quietly across his breast, as though to dismiss the Genoese.

The old man scrutinised every corner of the room to see whether anything had been forgotten. Then, as he caught sight of the portraits, after a moment's reflection he exclaimed:

“If your grace cares to let us have these pictures, we will advance him twenty ducats upon them and, later, if your grace wishes to acquire another palace, we will return them to him for a slightly larger amount.”

Ramiro rose abruptly to his feet. What were they proposing to him? Sell the portraits of his ancestors! The insulting suggestion brought home to him keenly the full horror of the catastrophe which had overtaken him. Was it indeed possible that the mere fact of the loss of a patrimony could embolden a knave like this to propose barefacedly such ignominious trafficking to a man of his, Ramiro's, rank? To ask him to put a price upon the sacred emblems of lineage? Ah, no! Rather would he beg along the streets, rather gnaw his wrists for sustenance, than sell for a handful of vile coins those likenesses which he would always treasure. Under their auspices his future should unfold itself, and wherever they might be, near or far, their example of piety and honour would be ever present in his mind.

He said:

“Let the dog of an usurer know that I am well aware of his object in making such a proposal, and let him understand also that even if he were to pile up in one

tremendous heap all the gold which he has stolen up to the present together with all that which he will steal in times to come by means of his swinish avarice, he would never have sufficient wherewith to purchase even the tiniest fragment of these portraits, which are of greater value to me than all the wealth of the Indies."

A proud smile crossed his implacable countenance, as though he were sure that the immortal souls of his ancestors had witnessed this gesture of refusal, which he dedicated to them as a tribute of respect. Then, pointing to the door, he ordered the Genoese to retire.

A moment later Pablillos came in with the steaming repast.

Ramiro ate with dignity—without allowing the ignoble delight of his belly to reveal itself in his face—while the page, standing by his chair, told him the story of his recent escapade.

At the hour when the porters were enjoying their siesta, he had gone to Pedro Gil's shop in the Mercado Chico, saying that his master, Don Diego de Valderrábanos, had just returned from the mountains, and had sent out for certain articles of food. They must be delivered as soon as possible, for he was extremely hungry. Then, leaving the shop, Pablillos took up his position outside Don Diego's house, concealing his cap beneath his jerkin and pacing to and fro in the courtyard before the house, as though he were one of the servants. The victuals were not long in arriving, and he took them angrily, saying in testy tones to the boy who had brought them: "Thou mightest easily have had to carry all this back again, thou tortoise, for I had orders from my master that I was not to take them if they did not arrive soon—very soon." Hardly had the boy turned his back upon the house when the porter appeared at the window of the lodge. Pablillos then strode forward confidently, begging the man to excuse him. The sun was so strong that he had entered the courtyard to take shelter and relieve himself for a

moment of the weight of the heavy bundle he was carrying.

Ramiro tried to look indignant, but the bliss of repletion enervated his will. He took out a coin and gave it to the page, ordering him to pay at once for the articles he had stolen. Then he was to groom and harness the horse and get together clothes and weapons for a long journey which he, Ramiro, had to make upon the following day.

His head leaning against the back of the chair, his elbows supported upon the arms, his fingers intertwined, he closed his eyes in order that the moments might seem to pass more quickly until Beatrice's reply, which Casilda was to bring him, should arrive.

Envisaging now the enchanting lips of his beloved, which appeared and disappeared continually before his eyes; now an ocean of gigantic waves, fleets in full sail, heroic attacks upon vessels, strange weapons and strange banners, he gradually dozed off to sleep. A rat crept out from its hole, to be followed almost immediately by others, and they all devoured in timid haste the crumbs which lay scattered around the table. Suddenly Ramiro crossed his legs and, in a trice, like one animal, all the rodents disappeared into the walls with lightning rapidity. Then they came out once more, drew close together and, gaining confidence, completely surrounded the young hidalgo's chair—faithful friends in misfortune.

When Casilda returned, Ramiro was fast asleep. The girl gazed down at him for some time, fearing, perhaps, to awaken him. Two long, dank wisps of black hair straggled down over his forehead. A mysterious radiance seemed to hover about his eyelids, and the dead pallor of his skin accentuated the vivid scarlet of his lips. Casilda cried:

“Sire! Sire!”

The messenger had brought bad news. She had, following her usual plan, caused herself to be announced

by Leocadia. This time, however, Beatrice had refused to receive her.

“But did she not know it was I who sent you?” asked Ramiro. The girl replied with a smile.

“Did you go up to her apartment? Did she see you?”

“She saw me plainly enough—and I showed her, from a distance, your grace’s letter; but she told them to inform me that she was making her toilette before she went down to the salon, and that she could not be bothered with letters at such a time.”

“Did she say that?”

“Her very words, sire.”

“And did you not at least send her the letter by some servant?”

“And what if your grace had been angry with me for so doing?”

Rising from his chair, Ramiro replied: “I am angry now at your foolishness.”

The girl’s eyes grew dim, and she fumbled with her apron. Ramiro, far from relenting before this humility, grew more and more furious. Taking Casilda by the shoulders, he pushed her violently away from him, shouting:

“Get out of here, you rogue!”

She ran to the door, and suddenly the sound of stifled sobbing could be heard, growing fainter and fainter as the girl receded along the gallery.

Was it indeed possible that Beatrice had not wanted to receive his message? His pride prompted him to seek an explanation in his own conduct. But with what inconstancy, with what indifference, could she reproach him? Did he not pace the street before her house every day? Did he not lie in watch for her outside the city, opposite to the tower in her garden? Did he not send her jewels and compose love songs and sonnets in her honour like the most infatuated of lovers?

Absorbed in these reflections, he remained in his room until nightfall.

Two hours after he had dined, he said to the page:

“Thou canst get thee to bed now, boy.”

“Has not your grace heard,” asked the youth, “a noise like the clanking of a chain and the rattling of bones in the next room?”

“It must be someone trying to steal the mortar from the wall.”

“You should not jest about it, sire—for might it not be some shrouded spectre! I, for my part, am trembling with fear.”

Pabillos left the room, and Ramiro went out into the gallery. The stones, the grassy soil of the *patio*, everything was bathed in the clear, refreshing light of the moon. Ramiro leaned over the balcony and gazed up into the sky.

Great luminous clouds were floating upon the majestic sea of silence. The splendour of the moon illuminated only the two sides of the gallery; a spectral light which made him think of ghosts and apparitions. The arches loomed up disquietingly in the darkness.

Torn by amorous uncertainty, Ramiro could think only of Beatrice. No matter where he looked, he always seemed to see her face before him. He saw it upon the walls, or, dimly, through the veil of darkness. He saw it in the heavens, vague, sublime, her beauty one with the enchantment of the night. Sometimes it was her form, clad in white nuptial garments, which roamed under the arches or upon the lawns, like one who walks in her sleep. Ramiro was seized with a sudden ecstasy. The solemn sweetness of the night entered into his soul, and he seemed to breathe the perfume of the innumerable flowers which spread their petals, now stained, like their stalks, with the fantastic, pearly light of the moon-beams, between the tiles of the *patio*. Not the faintest murmur could be heard. The silence was profound, but his spirit was not conscious of solitude. He was aware of something, the beating of some other heart, away out there in the gloomy places of the night.

An hour passed by. The light was crossing the wall in front of him. Upon his right, another corner of the *patio* was coming into view. Another moulded arch could now be seen, and Ramiro, as he glanced in that direction, distinguished the figure of a woman, gazing, as he was gazing, out into the night. It was Casilda. Her breast heaved from time to time, and her eyes glittered strangely, as though wet with tears.

Ramiro was astonished at his own emotion. That companion of his childhood was now invested with an unexpected and ideal charm. Casilda was also a woman, as beautiful as any. A fruit ripened in his own orchard, a fruit which he had disdained to taste solely because it was there for the picking. He reflected that she would come to him in response to the slightest gesture, the lightest sally, come to surrender her body to him with the calm obedience of a slave. He thought of monarchs of old who would have given their crowns for one moment of that passionate ecstasy which, if he cared, he could then and there enjoy. Yes, the slightest movement of his lips and that delightful creature would come to fill his lonely night with rapture.

But no. The pain in his heart was too terrible, too insistent, and on that account, perhaps, his passion for Beatrice grew more tyrannical, more engrossing than ever, appearing to him as the only conceivable love. He stood erect and, without the young girl either seeing him or suspecting his presence, threw himself down upon the bed to dream of that kiss which Beatrice had interrupted by her cry, of that tempting, terrible mouth which, thenceforth, in his imagination, never ceased to throb and quiver upon his own.

VI

UPON the following morning, at the usual hour, Ramiro directed his steps towards Beatrice's street. He paced incessantly to and fro before the palace. The windows did not open an inch. In the afternoon he left the city by the Gate of St. Vincent and went to sit down near the wall. The tiny figure which usually appeared away over there upon the turret, its face turned towards him, did not appear this time—nor would it ever appear again.

During the days that followed, he paced the street of his beloved untiringly. How terrible was the disillusion which those green shutters held for him! There are no harsher words for a lover than those of lattices pitilessly closed, lattices which seem to reject and mock him in the name of his mistress!

He was alternately exalted and dejected by a wrathful amazement, an immense anger, restrained before the riddle of the circumstances, but ready, like a falling boulder, to crush the guilty one to powder. Beneath this indifference on the part of Beatrice he must seek some fresh plot, hatched by his rivals. She was surely innocent—the victim of some trick. God knew what suspicions they had contrived to implant in her heart! He did not, however, wish to let his thoughts dwell upon Gonzalo now. As was his proud wont, he sought to put out of his mind all thoughts of revenge, so that anger should consume him only when he was about to inflict the inevitable punishment. Chance willed it that upon one of these days, as Ramiro was pacing to and fro beneath Beatrice's window, Don Alonso should be approaching his house along the same street, borne in a sedan chair and accompanied by a few servants. Ramiro saluted him frankly, with a wide sweep of his hat. The hidalgo hastily lowered his eyes, acknowledging the greeting with the slightest of bows.

“What can be the meaning of this, O most Holy Virgin!” the youth muttered to himself. He felt tempted to retrace his steps and accost Don Alonso directly. But no. . . .

Once again at home, continually ransacking his mind for an explanation, he fancied that he had discovered a fresh clue. Perhaps, in addition to the mysterious calumny, Don Alonso had heard the true story of his, Ramiro’s, ruin. Someone had informed him of it; and who could say whether his age, benumbing his heart, had not rendered him calculating and avaricious?

He was once again filled with hatred for this “wretched village,” as Don Alonso himself had called it in a moment of ennui. A prison city, he reflected, where the most noble souls were tarnished by the rust of indolence; where the continual promiscuity of the same ambitions brought into being the most monstrous rivalries; where one lived subject to a relentless espionage, every chink and crevice an eye, every curtain an ear, every breeze a slanderous tongue; where every generous impulse was confined within walls more formidable by far than those which enclosed the narrow precincts of the city, and where, in truth, only those whose souls were strong enough to wing their way to the highest heaven could free themselves from the tyranny of disillusion and disgust. Now he could understand why so many noblemen left their domains in order to take up residence at court, or to seek fortune and honour in Flanders, Italy or the Indies. Meditating thus upon his own plight, he fell a prey to an irresistible impulse. He would tempt Fate, risking all the money which he had received from the usurers upon the hazard of a single instant. Perchance his wealth might thus be multiplied indefinitely. He already saw himself in the act of subjugating capricious Fortune, seizing her by the hair, like a woman who resists. He would fill his coffers and enjoy opulence, if only for a few months. He desired no more than this. They would think in the city that he had succeeded in

recovering his patrimony, and Don Alonso would again welcome him with open arms.

Once, in the company of another youth, he had entered a gambling den near the Gate of the Bridge, a house frequented by the principal noblemen of the town. There it was that he had made the acquaintance of Don Enrique Dávila, now confined in his castle of Turégano for the part he had played in the affair of the pasquinas. There also he had met Valdivieso, Heredia, the brothers Verdugo, Antonio Mújica, and many other friends, including Gonzalo and Pedro de San Vicente. He drew his large felt hat down over his eyes and, throwing his Segovian cape over his shoulders, set out for the gaming-house, preceded by his page.

The moon had not yet risen, and as he proceeded along the Rua, in the direction of the Adaja, Ramiro lifted his eyes to the stars. Would that he could have read that trembling, sumptuous writing in the heavens!

At about five o'clock in the morning, he was once again in his room.

"And did not your grace say some prayer as he entered the gaming-house, or as he leaned over the table?" his page asked him, continuing the conversation in which they had been engaged since they left the door.

"Enough of that, Pablillos, for now is not the time to discuss what I did or did not do."

"But I think that your grace . . . When, in Salamanca, I began to gamble with other boys like myself, I won every *cuarto* they possessed whenever I repeated a certain prayer I know of."

"Was it thus that you succeeded in acquiring so much wealth?"

"Do not mock me, your grace, for at that time I was living with the most extravagant woman in the world."

Pablillos, having removed his master's hat and

gloves, exclaimed, in a frightened tone, as he took off his cloak:

“Have they stolen your grace’s chain? Good God!”

“The cord has followed the pitcher into the well, Pablillos.”

“Did your grace stake that too?”

“I did.”

“Then your grace has lost all he possesses?”

“All.”

“Ah! what a terrible calamity! And how shall I be able to purchase food for to-morrow and the days that follow?”

“You would naturally think of that, knave that you are!” exclaimed Ramiro, almost angrily.

“Not so great a knave as all that, sire—for it is well known that the Martínez family were of the purest Castilian blood, and if it had not been for the fire which destroyed my parents’ mansion, I could at this very moment show your grace the great parchments which prove my nobility.”

Then, after removing his master’s shoes, he stammered, with cautious humility: “Your grace will remember that the Genoese—at least so I understood—offered twenty ducats for the portraits of your ancestors.”

Ramiro was already between the sheets and, hiding his face from the light in order to go to sleep, he muttered between his teeth:

“Let them go, let them go, Pablillos; but make it clear that . . .” The rest of the sentence was lost among the bedclothes.

VII

BITTER was the awakening of the young hidalgo. Pablillos brought him the money from the Genoese, to whom he had delivered the portraits at the break of dawn.

After informing his master concerning the details of the transaction, he said:

“I must tell your grace that, as I was crossing the *plazuela*, I came across Pedro de San Vicente, the younger, who seemed to be lying in wait for me. He declared, with a great air of mystery, that Don Alonso Blázquez had decided to take orders so soon as his daughter was married, and that his, Pedro’s, elder brother was pacing milady Beatrice’s street after night-fall, and that less than an hour ago Gonzalo had received a letter which must have come from her, arranging a meeting for to-day—for, from behind a curtain, he heard him utter many heavy sighs, saying: ‘Yes, my beloved, yes, I shall come, I shall come this very night, whether it pleases you or no, little Señor Ramiro.’ And he charged me that I should not forget to tell your grace all this, word for word, because it was of great importance to you.”

“Who pays any attention to the ravings of a drunkard?” replied Ramiro disdainfully. Nevertheless he felt himself tremble from head to foot.

He sent for Medrano, and told him all the details of this strange affair; Beatrice’s disdain, Don Alonso’s coldness, and the story which the page had just told him. The steward grew suddenly pale and, stroking his beard, replied:

“The love of a maiden is as water in a basket!” Then, raising his head: “Perchance this is some trick of Franco the bell-ringer’s?”

Ramiro, thinking that he alluded to the affair of the *moriscos*, shook his head. Without delay, as one who makes up his mind to cut the knot in summary fashion, he donned his jerkin and girded on the sword which Don Rodrigo del Águila had given him. Then, drawing the blade from its sheath, he folded his hands upon the hilt and, pressing it to his heart, said a long prayer. Then he made the sign of the cross upon his forehead with the haft and, running his eyes along the

blade with a curious expression, silently replaced it in its sheath.

All the arrangements had been made. He had ordered Medrano to keep watch before Beatrice's house, for he wished to know exactly what was taking place, moment by moment, should the story of the letter prove to be true. He, for his part, would wait by the Gate of St. Vincent, and Pablillos would act as courier. It was after eleven o'clock in the morning when Ramiro and his servant left the city, taking, upon the left, the outer path which leads in a southerly direction to the foot of the walls. The boy went on in front, lively and cheerful, and although his belly was hollow as a drum, his instinct scented an odour of adventure which was as meat and drink to him. His master was a man of few words and if "the other" turned up with his guitar beneath the lady's window, there would certainly be a rumpus worthy of the streets of Salamanca. He, for his part, believed himself to possess the best pair of legs in the kingdom, and provided that he were not unexpectedly stunned by a blow upon the head with a guitar—such a knock as he had once received upon the banks of the Tormes—he had no fear as to his own safety.

It was a clear, radiant morning. Pablillos felt the sap of life stir in his blood, an itch to dance, to beat the earth with his toes and cast upon the winds one of those shrill songs which re-echo from hill to hill. Spring gilded the cornfields with a silky, undulating brilliance, a green and silver chasuble upon the dull red earth. The sunlight glistened upon the granite rocks, gleamed upon the ploughshares, flashed upon the river, poured in a golden shower over the Sierra de Villatoro. Everything was impregnated with the light and freshness of the morning, even the sound of the bells, the clanking of the anvils, and the singing of the weavers and tinkers in the Santiago quarter. Some women were burning heaps of dead leaves at the foot of the hill, and a rustic perfume, sweeter than incense, pervaded the country-

side. Ramiro's thoughts turned involuntarily to his Moorish love.

When he reached the Gate of St. Vincent, he told the page to wait there while he, Ramiro, went to take up his position opposite the northern wall.

It was past noon, and Ramiro had received no news.

At about five o'clock in the evening, Pablillos came to tell him that Don Alonso had just left his house in a covered chair, and that, according to an old lackey, he had, for some time past, been in the habit of spending the night in the Monastery of St. Thomas. Evening was sinking to its death. Ramiro seated himself upon a rock, his face almost hidden beneath the brim of his hat. In the spectral glow of the twilight, the violet earth seemed to break in waves at his feet. From time to time the young hidalgo raised his head, gazing blankly before him, indifferent to the magic of the sky and the enchantment of the landscape. His soul, however, instinctively absorbed something of the sternness, the sublime ferocity of this sinister and passionate place.

The sun, as it sank below the horizon, flooded the golden sky in a blaze of dying glory. Ramiro's eyes grew wide and solemn.

All at once the rugged majesty of the walls was shrouded in a desolate gloom. To Ramiro's idle fancy, it seemed that the towers succeeded one another at regular intervals, like the Paternosters of the Rosary; that the turrets were the Aves, and the cathedral, with its projecting dome, the hollow crucifix filled with the relics of saints and cavaliers.

When Pablillos arrived with nothing to report, his master informed him that he was going to St. Vincent's cave in order to pray. Then he set out to cast himself at the feet of Our Lady of the Cavern.

As he approached the basilica, he put his hand into his pocket and drew out the Rosary of the Fifteen Mysteries, a present from his first tutor, Friar Antonio de Jesús. It was an antique rosary from the Holy Land,

whose beads, made out of camels' bones, had been strung upon a stout, taut cord of white silk.

"Always carry with thee this rope for strangling demons," the Franciscan had said when he presented it to the youth.

The church was gloomy and deserted. A silver lamp was burning in the choir. The strange blue-and-gold shrine of the martyrs now looked more mysterious than ever, thought Ramiro. He went down into the crypt. The miraculous image was surrounded by flaming tapers. In a corner, two women, prostrate upon the ground, were moaning dismally. Completely enveloped in their cloaks, they looked like two enormous, moribund bats. In a fever of devotion, he recited the fifteen mysteries of the rosary. Then, when he thought that it was dark enough for him to walk the streets unobserved, he set out for the city, which he entered by the neighbouring gate. He took up his position within a few paces of Beatrice's house. He waited a long time.

Suddenly a human form brushed by him. Shortly afterwards, he saw a band of night watchmen approaching. A constable walked in front swinging his smoky, iron-grilled lantern. Its garish light beat full upon the faces of the watchmen. Ramiro recognised the imposing features of Pedro Ronco, the alguazil. His eyebrows and moustaches looked as though they had been drawn with charcoal upon his face, yellow as tallow. The authoritative stamping of feet and clanking of swords died away in the distance.

Then he heard a voice: "Sire! Sire!" It was Pablillos.

He announced that, a moment previously, a masked man had halted before Don Alonso's house and that just as Medrano had despatched him with the news, another man, also masked, had appeared who, approaching the first one, accosted him roughly. Just as they were on the point of exchanging blows, the watch passed by. Making them remove their masks, and holding the lantern so that the light fell upon their faces, Pedro

Ronco, the *alguazil*, had recognised the two brothers San Vicente. With a threatening gesture he had ordered the younger brother to make himself scarce immediately, if he did not wish to spend the night in gaol. The elder San Vicente had also gone away; but, so the steward said, he would soon return to the same spot. Ramiro took up his position at the nearest corner. Meeting Medrano, he ordered both page and steward to leave him there alone. The moon was about to appear in the west, for the outline of the wall, with its triangular turrets, could now be dimly discerned.

Ramiro allowed more than an hour to pass by without removing his eyes from Beatrice's house. It seemed to him as though the wicket gate was half opened, then closed again. Suddenly a woman's form appeared at the opening. A white headdress and an extraordinary corpulence betrayed the presence of Doña Álvarez. Growing confident, she leaned forward, farther and farther. At length, very softly, she hallooed several times. There was no reply. The wicket gate was closed again.

Ramiro was just thinking that Gonzalo would not return that night, when he saw, approaching along the street, the figure of a man. It halted before Beatrice's house, just beneath the window. Ramiro drew his rapier from its sheath and, covering the blade with his cloak, stepped quietly forward into the shadow of the darkest wall. It was Gonzalo! Although his face was covered by the black taffetas, he recognised him at once by the white plume, attached to his cap by a magnificent diamond brooch, and the gray cloak which he had worn some evenings ago at the gaming-house.

Just as the young *regidor* was about to rap upon the door, Ramiro, rushing out, caught his upraised arm. Then, tugging fiercely at the mask, with a violent effort he tore it from Gonzalo's face. San Vicente, in his turn, unsheathed his rapier and, shouting "Die!" hurled himself upon his rival. But Ramiro was ready for him,

his rapier outstretched. Gonzalo halted and furiously brandishing his sword, exclaimed:

“Ask my pardon, traitor!”

“Rather ask mine, villain, for your cowardly lies.”

“Death to the dog of a Moor!” shouted San Vicente.

“Softly, softly, sir *regidor*—unless you wish the watch to come to your aid.”

“I have no need of the watch.”

“Then let us, if you please, seek some quieter spot, where the clatter of our swords will not attract some duenna who may mistake it for the jingling of the gold in your purse.”

“Let us go where you will.”

They both sheathed their swords, and Ramiro followed the narrow path in a north-easterly direction, towards a lonely spot in the angle of the walls, which he had noticed during one of his promenades. Gonzalo walked on his left, and his gray cloak gleamed like cloth of silver in the tremulous light of the moon. When they had reached an old gateway, Ramiro halted and endeavoured to force the lock, Gonzalo assisting with his shoulder. At length, after many vain attempts, they both agreed to scale the wall. Gonzalo supported his foot upon Ramiro’s thigh and, when he had straddled across the wall, held out his hand to his rival. Thus, with valiant courtesy, did they lend one another aid, like the knights in the duels of which one reads in the romances of chivalry—Amadís, Roger, or Esplandián.

They found themselves in a deserted quarry. The rock, a huge mass of stone in the form of a hill, had not permitted the erection of a single building upon its adamantine surface, old as the world. The rampart towered on their right, crenelated, frowning, solemn, shrouded in fearful gloom.

Choosing the smoothest patch of rock, the two youths cast their cloaks upon the ground. Gonzalo also threw aside the buckler which he wore at his belt. The sky, completely covered with diaphanous clouds, bathed the

silent city in a mysterious, dawn-like light. In the east, a nacreous halo surrounded the hidden pearl of the full moon. They crossed their swords.

Gonzalo parried the thrusts with masterly skill, on the watch for a favourable moment to lunge. Ramiro, in his turn, wielded his rapier in a pompous, soldierly fashion, with fantastic flourishes. His teeth gleamed between his lips, parted in homicidal fury. San Vicente, for all his skill, felt himself waver before that stern, implacable countenance, all confidence, all energy, all courage.

At length, fearing lest he might lose heart, he feinted and made a sharp thrust at Ramiro, swift as an arrow. The blade pierced the side of his adversary's doublet, grazing the flesh. Then Ramiro, in a flash, took two long steps forward, so that his opponent's blade remained fixed in the leather, and, raising his sword, dagger-wise, plunged it into Gonzalo's breast. Then, savagely, he drove it up to the hilt, right through his jerkin.

Gonzalo cried: "I am done for!" and fell prostrate on the ground, a jet of black blood spurting from his mouth.

A shudder ran through his limbs; and then his lifeless hand fell limply upon the stones.

As he gazed at the body of his rival, now lying dead at his feet, Ramiro offered up a brief prayer of thanksgiving to the Virgin of the Cavern. He was avenged! The spring of pride welled up within him, flooding his whole body with a great and savage joy. He felt the plume upon his hat rise in the breeze like a crest, and, in his heels, a strange sensation of invincible might. He would have liked to shout aloud to the moon the war-cry of his ancestors.

Moved by a sudden impulse, he stooped down over the corpse and, loosening the buckles, took out from between the doublet and the bloodstained shirt an undirected letter. He opened it. The light was dim, but, glancing up at the sky, he noticed that the moon was

about to pass through a fissure in the clouds. A moment later he was reading the following words:

Will your grace please come to-night, after eleven o'clock. Knock three times upon the postern—and then again, twice—very gently. I will open. Cross the *patio* and the garden, and go up into the turret upon the rampart. My mistress will come immediately to speak with you.

Your faithful servant,

ALVAREZ.

He buried his forehead in his hands. Was it possible? Could it indeed be true that Beatrice . . .? Was it not all some infamous trick on the part of the duenna? It would be easy enough to find out. He ceased in his meditation and instantly, with nervous haste, exchanged his own black hat for Gonzalo's cap. Then, dragging the corpse to the edge of a ditch which loomed darkly against the foot of the hill, he gave it a vigorous kick so that it would roll to the bottom. Picking up the dead man's cloak, he muffled himself up in it completely. His own he rolled into a bundle, which he carried under his arm.

Just as he was about to scale the wall once more, he saw two faces appear upon the opposite side. A shudder ran through him. It was Medrano and Pablillos, who had watched the encounter from a distance. As he dropped into the street, the steward caught him in his arms, exclaiming:

"Zounds, but 'twas a brilliant thrust! Quickly, quickly, let us fly lest the watch return and surprise us here."

Ramiro ordered them, this time in imperious tones, to await him at the palace. Then, handing them his hat and cloak, he set out resolutely for Beatrice's house.

When he reached the door, he noticed Gonzalo's black mask lying upon the ground. Hastily picking it up, he put it upon his face. He rapped with his knuckles upon the door three times, then again, twice.

The cloak diffused an effeminate perfume. His mind

began to wander. One of Aixa's cushions, embroidered with gold thread, swam before his eyes, appearing and disappearing by turns. He noticed that the door was studded with nails, carved in the form of lions' heads. He knocked once again. His excessive emotion intoxicated him. At last the bolt creaked gently, and the wicket was half opened. Doña Alvarez looked out and, after a momentary scrutiny, said in a low voice:

“Welcome, Señor Gonzalo!”

Then, throwing the wicket wide open, and beckoning impatiently:

“Quickly, quickly!” she urged; “cross the *patio* and the garden and go up into the tower.”

When Ramiro found himself on the summit of the turret from whose platform he had, as a child, accompanied by the dwarf, watched evening fall, he leaned against the battlements and waited. He was in the grip of an incomprehensible apathy: a vague unconsciousness comparable to that which heralds delirium. Vague thoughts, which he himself did not understand, flashed through his mind. He smiled at the calm freshness of the night.

Away below, the hills billowed in harsh, steely waves. The Convent of the Incarnation, with its pale and gloomy walls, slept its holy sleep in the stillness of the night. A tenuous radiance seemed to emanate from the abode of passionate purity, as though its walls enclosed some miraculous garden of lilies. Low clouds, splintered like icebergs, covered the sky, through which there filtered that dreadful, sepulchral light so propitious for the weaving of spells. From time to time a cock crew, as though to herald the coming dawn. At the foot of the ramparts a dog barked mournfully.

Suddenly the rustle of silk could be heard upon the staircase. Ramiro drew himself up to his full height.

A woman had just appeared upon the tower, her face covered by a dark veil which her gloved hand gracefully withdrew. Beatrice's skin glistened like white marble,

and her glossy hair, bound with a golden fillet, gleamed in the night with the sheen of old armour. Two curls, escaping from their bonds, writhed upon the wind like two serpents. Her skirt of sapphire silk was adorned with broad galloons of silver, and the stuff of her corsage lay hidden beneath a mass of beads and tassels, a glossy coat which vibrated incessantly like a rippling lake. The girl raised her face to his, her eyes half closed, remaining for an instant motionless. Her lips seemed to drink in the ethereal radiance of the stars.

Ramiro stood like one possessed before this apparition. A sudden frenzy stirred his soul, devouring his whole being, like a flame which reaches out to consume some diaphanous veil. Beatrice was there before him, Beatrice his mistress, divine in the magic of the silent night. He forgot all his suspicions, forgot the letter and the duel, forgot, like one drunk or mad, that he was wearing the garments of another man, forgot the mask which concealed his face. It seemed as though, after some despairing dream, he had at last met his beloved, her husband now and her master, upon the tower of some enchanted castle. He approached her, folding her gently in his arms. Beatrice made but a feeble resistance. Upon her moist lips there gleamed a tiny azure drop of moonlight!

At first it was an ideal kiss, incorporeal almost, given with bated breath away up there in the silence, far above the sleeping countryside and the city wrapped in dreams. But all at once the indecisive contact awoke their dormant senses, and their mouths united, clove together, in a frenzy of desire. Beatrice moaned, but could not tear herself away, and Ramiro felt her body tremble with a superhuman ecstasy. At last it had come to him—the longed-for caress, the kiss of so many dreams! Beatrice's kiss, her kiss which in imagination he had felt so often upon his lips! But suddenly, in the height of his mad transports, reason, like a flash of lightning, seared his brain. All at once he

understood. It was terrible. His mouth still quivering upon her lips, he realised that he was wearing the cloak and cap of his dead rival; that his face was masked; that Beatrice imagined herself to be in Gonzalo's arms; that this kiss was another's kiss, another's triumph, the supreme caress destined for other lips than his, for another man! At this moment, the girl, lifting her face to his, cried passionately:

“Oh, Gonzalo, how happy you make me!”

And, insatiable, she again offered him her mouth.

Ramiro felt the beating of the wings of madness about his head. His whole being cried out like a red-hot steel which the armourer has suddenly plunged into the water. His mind gyrated in a black whirlpool, and within his brain he heard the howling of the dark, avenging furies. He was obsessed by one idea, one need, one just desire for annihilation, death.

Unable, however, to resist, he took Beatrice's second kiss and returned it, burying his teeth savagely in her lips. She screamed and, with a despairing effort, at last succeeded in freeing herself from his arms. Then Ramiro, suddenly removing his mask, revealed his face, shouting:

“Harlot! Harlot!”

The girl was unable to utter a single word. A dull groan, inarticulate, fatal, escaped her lips, black with horror. He hurled himself upon her and, throwing her upon the ground at the foot of the parapet, stuffed her shawl into her mouth to drown her cries. He felt for his dagger. Just as he was about to unsheathe, an instinctive impulse checked him. A strap! a cord! Where could he find one? Something that could be knotted. He tried madly to unfasten his belt, his garters, the tassels of his sword, even the ribbon in his hat. Suddenly his convulsive grasp fell upon Friar Antonio's rosary which was hanging out of his pocket. A hellish thought crossed his mind. Unhesitatingly he took the chaplet in his hands, tore it from the crucifix

with his teeth and, allowing a few beads to fall on to the ground, wound it around Beatrice's neck, tugging at it with both hands, tugging it first this way then that, until at length he had tied a ghastly knot upon that delicate white throat!

Then he descended the stairs. He crossed the garden and the *patio*. The duenna was waiting there, asleep by the postern gate. He opened it without awakening her and went out; but, when he had taken a few steps along the lane, he fancied that he could hear, behind the door, the voice of Doña Álvarez. Quickening his pace, he deliberately let fall upon the cobbles the cloak and cap of San Vicente.

He crossed the cathedral square, traversed the Rua, and reached his house. The steward awaited him at the door. They disappeared through the postern.

VIII

AFTER dismissing his page with a handful of doubloons and arranging with Medrano the day upon which they should meet in the little village of Cebreros, Ramiro left the city on the following morning at the break of day.

He decided to make his exit by the Gate of Antonio Vela. Gazing at the Moorish quarter of Santiago which lay upon his right, his thoughts wandered again to his intrigue with the beautiful Aixa, and it struck him that this woman was the cause of all his misfortunes, all his rebuffs, all his disillusionments. Who could say whether she might not have cast some spell upon him? He remembered her last glance at him before the tribunal, and his whole being was filled with a supernatural dread as he conjured up the vision of those eyes.

Upon reaching the first range of hills to the east, he drew in the reins of his horse. The white road stretched

out before him in the soft haze of the morning, far into the future. To follow it was to embark upon the quest of a new life. On either side of him the dewy thyme fields glistened, sunbeam-swept. He looked behind him. The city was calling to him in weary, perfidious accents, and the proud ramparts, crimson in the splendour of the dawn, reminded him of the scarlet cap of an executioner.

To return was to die, to die in his sins, to damn his soul throughout eternity.

When he had arrived at the first cross-roads, he halted. He did not think, did not want ever to think again, of Beatrice, whom he now believed to be dead, killed by his own hand the night before. But his conscience warned him insistently that if Gonzalo's body were discovered Pedro would most certainly be brought to trial as the murderer of Beatrice and his brother. An innocent man would be condemned in his, Ramiro's, place.

Tossed hither and thither in a tempest of indecision, he resolved to seek counsel from above. He said a paternoster and an ave, turned his horse's head towards the north and, slackening the reins, set spurs to the animal violently. The brute reared, but a moment later, as though by a miracle, it set off at full gallop in the opposite direction to the stable, away along the road to Cebreros.

“God wills it,” thought Ramiro. “An angel spurs the beast on.”

He was soon deep in the gorges of the sierra. Misled at times by the vague gesticulations of the shepherds, who pointed mechanically to the goat tracks which skirted the edge of the precipices; traversing the cruel moorlands swept by a devastating wind, where more than once he felt a keen desire to throw himself face downwards upon the sand to die, he at length found himself, one rainy day, at about siesta time, in Cebreros.

He put up at a hostel on the outskirts of the town and,

at nightfall, lay down to sleep upon a blanket among the wine skins. The voices of some men who were lodging in the same room prevented him from falling off to sleep. An old priest and a peasant exchanged the first questions:

“And whither is your grace bound—if he does not mind telling me?”

“I shall be delighted. I am taking the road to the capital, and thence I go on to Toledo.”

“Is your grace a Toledan?”

“I am from Tornadizos; but at the close of my life I am anxious to witness an auto-da-fé. Also, the chaplain of Las Clarisas is a relative of mine, and I should like to visit him.”

“Aha. . . . I am a native of this district—the valley, that is. I was born here, and here I have spent all the years of my life—a full sixty-three come next Christmas. My father—God rest his soul!—was of noble birth, but he was obliged to adopt the profession of a tanner in order to avoid seeing his many children die of starvation. He died of an illness they call . . .”

The priest seized upon the opportunity which his interlocutor's bewilderment afforded him, and began to relate how, a few days ago, two Moorish women from Ávila had passed through his town. They were being taken, in a green cart, to the Inquisition at Toledo. One of them, a famous sorceress, had also been endowed by the Devil with a most beautiful countenance. One of the guards had told him all the details of the crime which these two women were alleged to have committed.

Ramiro then heard the garbled story of the plot which he had unearthed.

“And in addition to all this,” the priest went on, “a muleteer who accompanied them assured me that the beautiful Saracen, by means of some devilish philtre, had succeeded in bewitching one of the most valiant, the most pious youths in that Christian city, causing him, within a short space of time, to deny the Faith of Our Lord Jesus Christ and take part in the conspiracy.”

"God and the Most Holy Virgin help me!" cried the peasant, crossing himself in terror.

Ramiro sat bolt upright upon his blanket. That terrible sin, that fearful dishonour which had marred his life, had now embodied itself, and passing beyond the walls of Ávila, was now stalking from inn to inn! The winy odour of the skins, the reek of the stables, the incessant pricking of the lice which infested the room, aggravated his bodily anguish, which seemed to him then to be the corporeal equivalent of his turpitude. He felt humble and contrite in the sight of God: but his pride flamed with aggressive arrogance when he thought of man.

When three days had passed with no sign of Medrano, Ramiro decided to continue his journey without waiting for the steward's arrival. It was a radiant morning in early May. He himself led his horse through the gateway of the inn, and was about to put his foot into the stirrup when his eyes, dazzled by the glare of the whitewashed walls, discerned a graceful little page who, mounted upon a hack, appeared to be signalling to him from a distance.

At last the little page drew near and, dismounting, begged timidly and tearfully to be allowed to kiss his hands.

It was Casilda, dressed in the livery of a lackey; but her eyelashes, her hair, and all her features were so obscured by dust that Ramiro had difficulty in recognising her. She informed him that on the very day of his departure, at about two o'clock in the afternoon, Diego Franco, the bellringer, had returned to the church with a scar upon his forehead, and that, upon being questioned by the canons, he had refused to utter a single word. She then added that her father had been imprisoned until such time as the truth concerning the sabre cut was discovered.

“He ordered me to tell your grace to proceed on your journey, to shave off your beard, and to get away as quickly as possible, under a false name.”

Then, lowering her eyes, and blushing beneath the white veil of dust which hid her face, she added that she had come to place herself at his service, and that she was prepared to follow him as his page wherever he might go.

“No,” answered Ramiro coldly, “your father needs you more than I. Return at once, and tell him in secret that I am going on to Toledo, where I shall await him.”

At this juncture he saw the priest and the peasant leaving the inn, and hastily removing the ring which he wore upon his right hand, he gave it to the girl, saying:

“Take this trinket—it may be of some use to you.”

Then, with a brief adieu, he remounted and set spurs to his horse.

Traversing gray and sterile plains, intersected at intervals by mountain ranges whose surface resembled the close-clipped hide of a mule, avoiding the villages, and sleeping under the open sky, he came one morning within sight of the famous city of councils and armouries, without any event of importance on the journey other than an encounter with some highwaymen, whose chief, the famous bandit Avendaño, admiring his courage, had given him back his jewels and his money and offered to make him his lieutenant.

As the cathedral bell tolled the twelve strokes of noon, his horse was crossing the bridge of Alcántara, now flooded in sunshine.

He was in Toledo.

PART III

PART III

I

RAMIRO spent the first two weeks in wandering aimlessly about the streets and squares of Toledo, without a friend, without a page, without a mistress, alone amid the tumult and turmoil of the city.

Impelled by the curiosity of one who has just arrived in a strange town, he rose earlier than was his wont, and, nearly every morning, after crossing the Zocodover and proceeding along the Street of Arms, he made for St. Martin's Bridge, sauntering along at the leisurely pace which befitted a man of his rank. In this way, strolling to and fro along the pavements, or leaning idly against the parapet, he allowed two or three hours to pass by, occupied only in watching the arrival of provisions from the country in the delicious freshness of the dawn. His eyes feasted themselves upon the confused medley of parti-coloured garments, the rough, tanned faces, the overflowing baskets, and the dusty herd of asses, sheep and oxen. It was the daily influx from the Vega and the surrounding pasture land, approaching the city by the giddy heights of the bridge, now gilded by the morning sun. It was the fields, the valley, the vineyard plots themselves, with their rustic odours, their bleatings, their tinkling of bells, their pastoral songs. At times, in exchange for a few farthings, the young Avilian would take from the baskets a handful of Mozamboroz or Ajofrin grapes, cool and fresh with the morning dew.

He had great difficulty in passing under the successive arches of the ancient embattled tower which

dominates the extremity of the bridge. His feet were sucked into a sudden eddy of goats or sheep; now he would receive a kick on the boot from an ass's hoof, now a herdswoman would push him roughly aside with her fist. One could not fail to be impeded beneath the vaulted gateway, where the villagers multiplied their shrill cries, and the cow-bells rang their discordant tocsin. Later, after admiring Juanelo's famous contrivance by which the water of the river was raised to the level of the Alcázar, or gazing, one by one, at the signboards outside the armouries, he would pay a visit to the churches; and, nearly always, about an hour before the ringing of the Angelus, his only toilet a twirl of the moustache, he would enter the Zocodover and pace the square or stroll up and down the arcades until nightfall. His unshaven face, his pallor, his travelling boots, his broad-brimmed hat, his long rapier and his threadbare, dusty clothes gave him the appearance of some warrior from Flanders, just out of the hospital of Santa Cruz.

This obscure mode of life, untroubled by vanity or passion, was gradually inducing in him a state of mind which resembled the placidity of convalescence. Barely remembering the tragedy upon which he had turned his back, regarding his liberty as now assured, and free from remorse other than that with which his conscience tortured him when he thought of his intrigue with the Moorish girl, he obtained a wretched price for his last pieces of jewellery and, disposing of his horse, which had now become a hindrance to him, he accumulated a few doubloons which served to free him for some time from vile pecuniary embarrassments.

He grieved no longer for his fatal love, nor did he reproach himself for the death of the perfidious Beatrice. In the book of his life all that was but a tragic leaf, now turned forever, a trick of fate for which he accounted himself in no way to blame. "The wife or betrothed who deceives us," he had said to himself, "at once becomes our worst enemy—once her treachery is un-

masked nothing remains but to kill her without mercy, and, after that, to forget her, forget her completely, erasing from the tablets of one's heart her very name, burying her memory as though it were some foul garbage." Such was the ancient law of honour. On the other hand, the brief story which he had heard from the lips of the priest in the inn at Cebreros had excited in his soul hesitations and regrets which he thought to have dispelled forever. The bygone days of his passion for Aixa came back to him now with a cruel vividness, and he came to think that, if all the sins he had committed in his life were put together, they would not equal in heinousness so great a sin as that. He fancied that his soul would be lost eternally if he did not succeed in purging it of so vile a treason against the kingdom, against the memory of his ancestors, against Holy Church, against Christ.

At the same time, he was possessed by a strange fear. What was the meaning of the story which alleged that, without his knowing it, he had been given the juice of magic herbs to drink? Had they indeed, as the priest said, made use of some philtre, some diabolical potion? He recalled the glance, so searching and so strange, which his former mistress had cast at him before the tribunal of the Inquisition, as she was being dragged once again to the torture, and he thought of some terrible evil eye whose influence might dog him throughout the rest of his life.

What incomprehensible impulse, he now asked himself, had just directed his steps in the direction of Toledo, Toledo whither she herself would be conducted by the guards of the Holy Office?

This last thought provoked in him a sudden trembling, filling him with a supernatural terror; but from time to time a commendatory voice whispered within him that the Divine Majesty had willed to bring him to the City of Justice that he might see the cesspool of his former licentiousness dried up by the avenging fire.

On some days he would spend lazy hours in wandering about the cathedral, a forest of stone in which the stained-glass windows glowed like flowers; and, meditating upon his sin, he would from time to time fall upon his knees in the gloomy chapels. But in moments of acute anguish he preferred one of the more intimate churches, such as St. Andrew's, St. Torquato's, St. Dominic the Royal's, or St. John the Penitent's, where he would crouch in the shades of some solitary high-altar, his face buried in his hands. At other times he would ease his torments by walking aimlessly about the streets.

He was overwhelmed by the mysterious complexity of Toledo. It was a city so entirely different from his native town. Ávila was not only far smaller, it was also plain and understandable. Here, on the contrary, nothing could be easier than to lose one's way in the maze of streets. Here one gazed up at the sky—a narrow strip of deep indigo between the two dark lines of eaves—as though from the depths of a moat. In some streets, narrow as corridors, the façades of the houses were shrouded in an eternal gloom. Only high up on the white-washed walls did some sudden ray of sunlight gleam.

Over these canals of shadow hung the closed balconies, caskets of espionage and mystery. At times a snow-white arm appeared between the lattices, throwing Ramiro a flower or a sweetmeat. The fierce and massive doors, studded with iron spikes, recalled the portals which guarded the seraglios of a bygone age. Ramiro felt the perfumed breezes of the East caress his nostrils; everything around him called up visions of magic, necromancy, the Koran, and, as he passed through the Moorish quarter, between the stalls laden with multi-coloured silks, scarlet caps, cereals, spices, perfumes, his heart burned with a fierce, fanatical hatred, now aggravated by bitter remorse. The walls, up to the level of a man's head, were worn and blackened as a result of that same contact with lazy human bodies which attenuates the pillars of the mosques. The converts,

their hairy legs crossed upon the counters, shouted to the buyers, rapping loudly upon their copper scales. The same chattering, the same gesticulations, the same ferocious and inoffensive menaces as in the Santiago quarter—but far, far more tumultuous here. Sometimes, as he passed by an open window, Ramiro heard the uproar of a *zambra*,¹ and, involuntarily, his mind called up the vision of Aixa, the anklets jingling upon her naked feet, her painted lips, her eyelids drooping under their burden of magic and desire. He would then wander from one part of the city to another in search of the solemn emblems of his faith; the calvaries, the convent walls and the victorious Cross itself, which now surmounted belfries still bright with the glazed tiles encrusted upon them by infidel hands.

He remembered the old legends which he had read or heard concerning Toledo, voluptuous stories which, like the garments of lovers, seemed to diffuse an odour of passion and lasciviousness. Thus it was that the city now spoke to him in the language of his own affliction, as though it were the very incarnation of his soul. Toledo was the city of penance and remorse, the city of expiation. Its monasteries washed clean with blood and tears the stain of its seraglios, the lubricity of its baths and divans. Austere and monastic virginities had laid forever the ghosts of its Jarifas and its Galianas. Its mosques had been purged with hyssop, its *mibrabs* and ablution chambers exorcised. The arabesques lay corroding beneath many layers of whitewash. The frenzied voices of monks in gloomy choirs drowned the last echo of the muezzin's call to prayer. Tapers and lamps burned unceasingly. The ancient minarets droned out their remorseful lamentations to the sound of Catholic bells.

An unearthly vision, a passionate desire for eternal salvation, glowed in the flashing eyes of the hidalgos, almost all of whom were clad in black. Even the

¹ A Moorish festival.

houses had a monkish air; houses wherein was passed a life of shadowy silence. In their gloomy vestibules lamps burned continually before images of Our Lady, as in the lodges of pious retreats, and through the lattices there stole an odour of incense.

That city, profaned by Jew and Moor, was, thought Ramiro, plunged, like one single soul, into a deep, religious grief; and he fancied as he roamed its streets at twilight that his cheek was fanned by a wandering, prayer-laden zephyr, the feverish breath of one who spends the night in penance and who knows not sleep. He too must purge his heart, cleanse it from the stain of other veneries, other perjuries, and drown forever the memory of the shame which rose like some grim rock between his soul and God.

One afternoon, seated upon a bench in the Zocodover, Ramiro made the acquaintance of Domingo de Aguirre, the old armourer. It was siesta time. As the bell tolled the hour of one, it seemed as though some hypnotic spell had been cast upon the city. Everything fell a victim to this mysterious charm. Even the wandering hawkers lay down beside their merchandise at the striking of the hour. In the square, not a few drew their cloaks about them and prepared for sleep. All the idle, gossiping crowd, pimps, beggars, wounded soldiers, unemployed artisans, gentlemen of fortune with powdered mustachios and coloured stockings, and more than one impoverished *hidalgo*, lay huddled together in this common sleep under the noonday sun. The houses gleamed white and dazzling against the sapphire sky. Far away in the *cigarrales*¹ the cocks were crowing.

Ramiro scrutinised every detail of those heaps of brown, and greenish cloaks. Meanwhile, seated upon his right, the armourer gazed at him intently, as though he wished to make his acquaintance. At length, in a very low voice,

¹ Orchards or fruit gardens on the outskirts of Toledo.

and pointing to the weapon which hung from Ramiro's belt, he asked him:

"Would your grace permit me to take a look at the fine sword which he is wearing?"

Ramiro handed it to him in silence.

The man, after unsheathing several inches of the blade, carefully examined the guard.

"It was not for nothing," he added, "that this trinket caught my eye. Here is my father's trade mark—Hortuño de Aguirre; God rest his soul in peace!"

Then, removing it completely from its sheath, he grasped the point of the blade with his other hand and, bending it like a reed, allowed it to spring sharply back again. The metal resounded like a bell heard in the distance.

"Ah! swords of this calibre are no longer forged, Señor hidalgo," remarked Domingo de Aguirre. "Every day the steel grows baser, everyday more vilely tempered."

"It is indeed said," answered Ramiro, "that the old secret has been lost."

"As for secrets, sire, there never were any. The water of the Tajo is the same as ever, its mud remains unchanged, fire is always fire; and as for how they are made—why, everyone knows that. It is honour that we have lost. Nowadays it is all a question of profit and sharp dealing. Apart from one or two armourers such as Ayala and Jusepe de la Hera, nowadays they only try to turn out swords as speedily as possible and fill their coffers. In my day we forged every blade as though God Himself and the whole world were watching us. If the sword did not turn out to be an honest, sufficient piece of work, as it should be, we would not have put it in our shop—no, not for all the wealth of the Indies! Ah! when I was about to finish off a blade, when I drew it from the coals for the last time, the colour of liver, when I greased it with suet in order to leave it to cool, point upwards, how my heart would beat, Señor hidalgo!"

Ramiro cast a sidelong glance at his interlocutor. He was wearing a fine, chestnut-brown doublet, beneath which one caught a glimpse of his jerkin of crimson velvet. A gold ribbon encircled his high-crowned hat. His tanned face, with its wide, protruding forehead, narrowed down, like a brown fig, to the long point of his beard. Beneath his eyebrows, which age had not yet whitened, there gleamed two sharp, piercing eyes, made to judge the temper of steel or follow the intricacies of damascenes. The fire had scorched his gnarled hands black as the branches of a vine. His grave mouth and austere glance were eloquent of constancy and honour. Although Ramiro had always looked with aristocratic scorn upon all those who soiled their hands with manual labour, it now occurred to him that the learned calling of an armourer must be free from all baseness, for was it not a noble employment which rendered invaluable services to the most exalted enterprises? He had heard it said that Toledan gentlemen did not despise the friendship of famous armourers, and were not the forges of the city frequented by the nobles?

These artisans were assuredly worthy of an especial respect. Imprisoned in their smoky forges, like Cyclops they tamed the stubborn steel and the angry flames, handing down from generation to generation the rude arts of their priesthood. Their passionate race had required of them, for the most illustrious purposes, those incomparable blades, those august and honourable weapons of dominion. Their daggers, their bucklers, their rapiers, their firearms, had contributed as much as had its councils to the fame of Toledo.

Domingo de Aguirre, after returning the sword, rested both his hands upon Ramiro's, and continued his discourse:

“Can it be wondered at, sire, if arms are no longer what they used to be, when we see that the whole nation is on the road to perdition?”

Ramiro made a gesture of astonishment.

“Yes, Señor *caballero*, Spain is going to the dogs.

The Cortes complain bitterly, and the king takes no heed of their complaints. The workman's back is breaking under the burden of taxation, the worm of the *alcabala* gnaws at the vitals of industry, the cities are full of melancholy, the fields are shrouded in gloom. To-day the favourites are skilled in the art of pillaging the towns, fleecing them, bleeding them, even though on the morrow they die. Give—give—give—and take it afterwards out of whomsoever you please!"

"And do you think," replied Ramiro, "that for the sake of a tax or so, be it large or small, we should abandon the honourable wars which are establishing our fame throughout the world, making the Spanish nation the wonder of the ages to come?" He made this interjection in courteous tones, not wishing to check the flow of words in which he was beginning to take a lively interest and which, now and again, reminded him of Bracamonte's speech.

"The honourable wars, sire, were the wars of olden times, when kingdoms were won at the point of the sword," replied the armourer; "but not so the wars of our day in which all is won or lost by means of doubloons. Does your grace imagine, perchance, that the regiments now go to war for the sake of glory, or to assure the triumph of our Holy Faith? To-day, as I make a soldier say in an interlude which I recently composed . . ." He paused, cleared his throat and, in the manner of an actor, declaimed the following speech:

"In these days, by Heaven! no shields can defend like those which jingle in the purse, no drum is better to march to than the rattle of doubloons, no *reals* are more brilliant than those of silver! In the old days one would risk one's life to uphold the king's renown—now only for the sake of his countenance, stamped at Segovia. Duchies are won by ducats, French strongholds are captured by means of their own pistoles, and, by St. Andrew! rather than hew the heretics in pieces I would hew my farthings into pieces of gold!"

“A witty speech!” exclaimed Ramiro. Then, raising his eyes and taking in at a glance the Zocodover and all its surroundings, he asked brusquely: “Could you tell me if this is the square in which the Holy Office celebrates its auto-da-fés?”

“Upon this very spot.”

“And are they as impressive as they are said to be?”

“The autos we see nowadays are unworthy of the name,” replied the armourer, adding, with a melancholy expression: “Ah! how brief, sire, are the glories of the world! No sooner is the cherry ripe and soft than it creeps the worm! Not alone the auto-da-fés, but even the games and pastimes of to-day—how can they be compared to those which I witnessed in my youth? What has become of all that luxury, all that fine display? Who will ever see again those triumphal entries, those ancient carnivals, those illuminations, those masks, those fine salvos of petards and rockets? What has become of those festivals, when the bands of jousters passed by in their silken cloaks and the lights o’ love, adorned with gold-embroidered scarves of silk, danced to the sound of the tambourine in the streets bedecked with flags? Indeed, Señor hidalgo, Toledo is no longer Toledo,” he cried, with a wag of his forefinger. “Its most illustrious noblemen departed with the court, and its artisans, for whom it was so justly famed, are now but as corn gnawed by maggots. Does your grace know that even the silk-weavers, driven thereto by excessive taxation, are giving themselves over to fraudulent practices and dishonest dealing; that some adulterate their material with salt and oil to make it heavier, mingling the fine strands with crude, unwoven threads, and employing slaves and Moors in order to keep wages down? Ah! it is no longer what it used to be, this chief city of all the Spains!”

The siesta was drawing to its close. Several of the sleepers showed unmistakable signs of awakening. Two alguazils were strolling about in the sunshine.

Aguirre, explaining forthwith the special privileges of his craft, concluded by saying:

“ Your grace knows, doubtless, that the profession of an armourer is a noble one, and that it enhances rather than tarnishes the purity of the blood. Otherwise my father would never have adopted it, nor, indeed, would I myself have done so: for our family is a very ancient one, connected, in the time of Alfonso the Wise, with the lords of Haro, that is to say, with the noblest lineage in Spain.”

II

DURING the days that followed Ramiro grew more and more familiar with his new acquaintance. Aguirre revealed to him those beauties of the ancient city which the stranger cannot discover unaided, and which, like crickets, seem to sing unseen. Their walks usually ended in a visit to Jusepe de la Hera’s forge. As the famous master entered, the artisans would cease for a moment in their work, and those whose heads were covered would respectfully remove their caps.

There, for the first time, Ramiro watched the manipulation of white-hot steel, and gazed in heroic ecstasy at all those swords, shortly to be broadcast throughout the most diverse countries, greedy for honourable blood-shed. Some were lying prostrate upon the anvils, ready to be flogged by the hammers; others uttered piercing, animal cries as they were suddenly plunged into the jars of water. Those which had reached the necessary stage of completion were anointed with tallow, like victims smeared with grease after the torture, or taken into the neighbouring workshop, there to be inlaid.

Out of all that filthy jumble of iron and coal dust magnificent objects were continually arising: helmets of peacock-blue inlaid with red gold, bucklers for use at tourneys, upon which love demanded the inscription of an ineffaceable device, daggers of the Moorish pattern

which bore upon their blades names of the purest Christian lineage, full-dress rapiers for the king, occasional swords hurriedly ordered by Flanders captains.

You could hear the panting of the bellows and the clanking of the anvils. From time to time, a man, almost naked beneath his scorched apron, would open the door of the furnace, his perspiring body lit up by the infernal glare of the flames, and cast upon the fire a handful of sand, or grasp with the tongs a piece of armour which looked like the rind of some red, fantastic fruit.

At one end of the workshop, the whitewashed *patio* offered a fascinating glimpse of the open air, and the sunbeams shone through the leaves of a vine which must have been planted several hundred years ago. There the visitors were entertained, and more than one nobleman would come there in person to select a blade for his sword.

Aguirre had retired from the trade more than five years ago. He was a man of substance, and lived like a nobleman. His house, near Santiago del Arrabal, was full of strange furniture. Years ago he had been wont to entertain his friends there with lively banquets, the gaiety of which, in the Italian manner, was enhanced by the strains of noble music; but of late a strange melancholy, a contempt for all worldly joys, an ever increasing desire to end his days in orders, were gradually taking possession of his heart and brain. He was intensely pious, a member of various confraternities and brotherhoods. When he knelt down in the churches before some image of Our Lady of Mercy, to whom he was especially devoted, his lips would quiver unceasingly and, as he gazed up to heaven, only the whites of his eyes would be visible.

On one occasion, when Aguirre was again speaking of his family, Ramiro, forgetting to observe the reticence which circumstances had imposed upon him, revealed his true name and lineage. Then, without further

parley, he told the whole story of his fatal love and the death of both his rival and his mistress.

“Your grace did well, indeed,” replied the armourer calmly. “A poor wretch he, who would not do likewise. All the more laudable was the deed in that, having killed your rival in an honourable duel, your grace then obtained the right to punish the woman in the same fashion. Ah! if I too were to tell the story of my own disillusion!” Aguirre said no more and they did not speak again of such matters.

It was only when Ramiro discovered one morning that, out of all the money which a *morisco* had given him for the jewels and the horse, there remained in his purse just three golden crowns and a few silver *reals*, that he began to foresee the moments of anguish through which he might have to pass. What was he to do? Manual labour was, of course, not to be thought of. Rather death than that—and far less could he think of living in the pocket of an artisan such as his friend the armourer. What could he do?

After long reflection only two solutions presented themselves as possible. Now he would think of seeking out some cave in the neighbouring woods, there to lead the holy life of an anchorite; now of rejoining Gaspar de Avendaño, the bandit, who had so magnanimously offered to make him his lieutenant. He had made up his mind to take one or the other of these two courses, but he vacillated continually between them.

At last he decided to confide his troubles to the armourer, who promised to speak to the Count of Fuensalida on his behalf so that he might later enter that nobleman’s service as a *valet-de-chambre*. Ramiro knew very well that to serve a gentleman so powerful, and of so exalted a rank, was rather an honour than otherwise, and he accepted the offer.

He was appointed *groom-in-waiting* and *assistant to the keeper of the plate*. It was his duty to carry in the wash-bowl, the towels, and the lemon, when the

count rose in the morning, presenting the basin himself, on bended knees, as etiquette ordained. He also had to proffer, upon a salver, the ruff and the handkerchief, bring forward the chamber-pot, which was handed to him by the groom of the toilet chamber, and hold the case of instruments while the surgeon tended the count for an old issue in the thigh.

At first the majestic life of the palace fascinated him; but later, when he found himself obliged to don the ragged livery of a defunct groom, suffer a wolfish hunger in the midst of so much luxury, and join with the other officials in devising the meanest subterfuges in order to obtain a few scraps, he felt a longing to turn his back upon Toledo and roam the countryside. To crown his misfortunes, he had as bedroom companion an Andalusian hidalgo, dirty and obsequious as a gipsy, concerning whom the others told the most scurrilous tales. On the other hand he felt himself, from the very first, greatly attracted by the frank bearing of the butler, Alonso de Velasco, a native of Zámora. One morning Velasco found him seated upon a stool in an ante-chamber, his face turned towards the wall, his forehead buried in his hands.

“What ails you, Señor del Águila? Are you philosophising, or are you asleep?” he asked.

“I was meditating, Señor Velasco,” replied Ramiro, “upon the terrible disillusionments of this world. When I was a small boy I was certain that some day I should be a Ferdinand Cortes or a Gonzalo de Córdoba—and now I have become the most insignificant, the most wretched of valets! Oh! if I could only weep!”

“Ah! I could make a great nobleman of you,” exclaimed Velasco, his eyes agleam with a mysterious thought.

“Of *me*?”

“Yes—but I fear that you would not keep the secret as it should be kept.”

“Do I look like a Moor?” answered Ramiro angrily

"Very well then, let us go down into the *plaza* and I will tell you."

When they had seated themselves upon a bench facing the cathedral, the butler opened the conversation by asking:

"Have you ever heard anyone speak of the Notorious Art?"

"Yes—but I know nothing of it."

"Then what would you say if all at once, merely by observing, for a short time, the practices and devotions which a certain sage will teach you, without the need of books or money and without fear of failure, you were to find yourself master of all the wisdom of Solomon and, in consequence, able to judge of the good and evil of all things, to read the book of the stars, to understand the language of the animals, to make yourself invisible at will or discern the position of the veins of gold beneath the earth or the places where precious stones lie hidden; to do, in fact, on this earth, all that your soul and your senses may desire to do, obeying only the law which your own fancy may dictate?"

"If he could do a single one of the things of which you speak, Señor Velasco," answered Ramiro incredulously, "any man could become king of the world."

"King of the world, king of the world . . . Raymond!" his interlocutor murmured pensively.

"For if anyone were able to make himself invisible at will," added Ramiro in conclusion, "all enterprises would be mere child's-play to him, all armies would wish to have him for their captain, all nations for their emperor.

"Then you will consent to come with me to-night to the house of this sage, for whose information I enquired of you, not long ago, the year and hour of your birth, and who, although he has never set eyes on you, already knows you as though you were his own son, and who will raise you above all men, making you equal to the angels? You are laughing?"

"I think," said Ramiro, "that you must have come across some famous sorcerer. But no matter—let us go where you will, and I will undertake to save you from any perilous wizardry!"

Ramiro and his companion were unable to leave the palace until half-past ten at night. Here and there the inky blackness of the streets was relieved by white, shroud-like streaks of moonlight. The towers and roofs cast their shadow upon the cobbles of the squares. The tiles seemed to glow with a mysterious blue light, and some windows, flooded in moonbeams, called up visions of love and passionate adventure. A frenzied murmur of guitars and lutes rose from all quarters of the town in the stillness of the night.

As they turned a corner, they heard upon their left the clash of swords, followed by the sound of a hoarse voice, shrieking: "Confession! confession!"

Ramiro wished to run to the victim's aid; but Velasco restrained him, saying:

"Come on—we are neither monks nor constables!"

"We are here," cried the butler suddenly, as he halted before a dilapidated house in the San Miguel quarter. After crossing two *patios*, they mounted a worm-eaten staircase and at length reached a landing facing the door of an attic. Velasco gave three low whistles, and immediately afterwards uttered some incomprehensible word. The door opened, and they went in.

They found themselves in a long, narrow room. On the right, a small marble altar, covered with a sheep-skin, could be discerned in the mysterious gloom. There was no light other than that afforded by the moonbeams which, striking through the dusty window pane, fell directly upon the pages of an enormous book, as large as a hymnal, which lay open upon a lectern of wrought iron, black as pitch. There could also be seen, scattered about in different parts of the room, crucibles, a large telescope of brass and copper, an alembic whose funnel passed through a hole in the wall into the next apart-

ment, and many other objects, scarcely distinguishable in the starry twilight of the chamber.

"Wait," cried Velasco, "wait, we are not there yet." Ramiro halted, his eyes fixed upon the strange device painted upon the folio, between two interlacing triangles of gold.

No one came. Suddenly the page of the book, with the peculiar rustling of parchment, rose very slowly, and—turned itself over! Ramiro trembled from head to foot, filled with a supernatural dread. His hands were shaking. Then, like a figure dimly glimpsed in the misty light of dawn, there gradually came into view, as though by a miracle, a human form—the motionless profile of a man, stooping over the volume. At first one could discern only his long hair, then his cloak, trimmed with marten's fur, which fell below his knees, then his right arm, and, finally, the hand which rested upon the page. When he had made himself completely visible, he turned his head and came slowly, very slowly, towards Ramiro. His face, pale as ivory, was scored with deep, vertical furrows which disappeared into his snow-white beard, a beard which his nervous fingers had twisted into ringlets during long hours of meditation. His eyelids were heavy with the weariness induced by nightly vigils. He put his arm around Ramiro's neck, and the youth felt the repulsive roughness of the skin, corroded by acids. The man spoke:

"Born under the sign of Saturn. Consumed with a frenzied passion for dominion and glory. Proud and magnanimous. Capricorn has carved the lines upon this forehead."

Then, turning the youth's face towards the moon and gazing intently into his eyes, he uttered these words:

"Ah! I see here a rupture wrought by the evil eye. The demon can go in and out through this aperture as he lists. But no matter. A Salome bewitched him, a virgin shall save him. Wait—" he said,—and taking up a silver rapier which lay upon the altar, he pointed it at Ramiro's eyes.

The youth felt an icy breath upon his forehead.

"You will go to confession as long as you live without speaking one word concerning me, under pain of perdition," added the wizard, replacing the sword. "You will communicate upon every day in the seven in seven different churches; you will fast upon bread and water every Friday, saying the prayers which this brother here will teach you, upon the first seven days of the new moon. Then you will return to me, and I shall make you the mightiest of men, for your constellation is unique."

Ramiro was about to open his lips in order to ask whether there was anything in all this contrary to the commandments of Holy Church; but the wizard, putting his finger upon the youth's lips, opened a book at hazard and read aloud the following words:

"He who fears anything whatsoever cannot become the Omnipotent Master.

"Liberty in willing, remembering and knowing is of greater worth than a kingdom or an empire."

As he concluded his reading he vanished into the air like an empty dream.

When they found themselves once again in the street, Ramiro asked:

"What is this man's name?"

"Moses Raymond."

"And do you know how he makes himself invisible?"

"I think it is by virtue of some mysterious preparation of the bloodstone."

"And if he is the possessor of so wonderful a power, why does he not make himself lord of some kingdom?" added Ramiro in a tremulous voice.

"Because he is one of the holy race of the Magi, to which the three wise men of the Bible—Gaspar, Baltasar and Melchior — belong, and also the famous, Simon the Sorcerer and our King Alfonso, he whom they call the Wise. These Magi of our day, as a punishment for their failure to decipher certain secret codes, whose key was lost in the burning of a great library of the

ancient world, spend their lives hidden in their retreats, where they study unceasingly. But so soon as one of them can say 'Eureka!' they will regain their dominion over the world, which they used to rule, according to what we read in the most ancient documents."

That night Ramiro's soul burned with a delirious frenzy. He could hardly sleep, and his dreams were a confused procession of triumphs, treasures, bejewelled and voluptuous women. This state of mind persisted for several days, and, as he wandered through the streets, he took a keen delight in repeating to himself the amazing words: "I shall make you the mightiest of men, for your constellation is unique." He had no doubts as to the sage's ability to fulfil his promise, and he was already conjuring up visions of what he would achieve when Moses Raymond had initiated him into the secrets of magic. Yet, from time to time, his conscience reminded him that the Church had condemned absolutely all occult arts, every description of divination. His will, however, in the grip of temptation, eager to triumph in the world, cost what it might, demanded incessantly that the miracle might be worked. All kinds of sophistries presented themselves to his mind. He would first of all exorcise the spell which the Saracen girl had cast upon him. Then he would become the unique, the mighty knight of God, omnipotent, glorious! . . . He began to fast and pray.

When the time for confession arrived, Ramiro asked the armourer to introduce him to some priest of signal intellectual attainments. Aguirre took him to the house of Don Antonio de Mendoza, canon of the cathedral and late archdeacon of Guadalajara. Don Antonio, a scholar learned in all subjects both sacred and profane, inhabited the old mansion of his family, in the neighbourhood of St. John the Penitent's. In its vast salons, lined with tapestries of cardinal silk, in the Roman style, there congregated every Sunday at noon a large assembly. Here men of title rubbed shoulders with skilful

*estofadores*¹ of altar-pieces, or humble craftsmen who forged with their own hands the fine iron grilles of choirs.

Ramiro had not sufficient courage to lay bare his soul to the canon upon the first occasion, and he decided to confess himself gradually, attending, in the meanwhile, these Sunday reunions. There he would hear the most surprising anecdotes, obscene stories of convent life, scurrilous tales concerning priests and their mistresses. He heard Zapata, the canon, say that the Pope was an ass; he heard Palominos, the captain, tell with cynical wit the story of how, during the Portuguese campaign, his soldiers, after a whole day's fighting, entered a church in Oporto and there drank the holy water in the stoups, and how, in virtue of his captaincy, he was offered the oil in the lamp which burned before the Blessed Sacrament.

Provided that no attacks were made upon points of dogma, Don Antonio would listen to the most scabrous tales without turning a hair, and even take a delight in mortifying the monks, holding them up to ridicule before the assembly.

He was extremely fond of perfumes, which the nuns of St. Anne compounded for him according to certain rare and exquisite formulæ. When he sat down he would cross his legs in order to display his silk stockings and the golden buckles upon his shoes. His hands were white and chubby as a woman's; but his piercing eyes and strident voice, whose deep tones caused everything in his vicinity to vibrate, bore witness to his energy and virility. The arms of the Mendoza family were emblazoned upon his breviaries. As he passed from one room to another a page, clad in purple livery, held up the train of his long cloak of camlet. On the first two occasions upon which Ramiro went to cast himself at the canon's feet, he encountered in the corridors a lady, closely muffled up in her mantle. On his last visit, as no one came forward to conduct him to the cleric's room, he opened by mistake the door of an antechamber—to

¹ Quilters.

find himself in the presence of a beautiful woman who was reclining upon a divan of the Moorish pattern. Her skirt, drawn up beyond her garters, revealed her short, plump legs, to which her stockings of pearl-grey silk clung with a seductive tenacity. A cloud of perfumed smoke rose from the silver censer suspended from the wall. The woman sat up with a frightened cry, and Ramiro closed the door again. A moment later the canon sent a page to tell him that he would return after the ringing of the Angelus.

He received him in a room next to his oratory. His face was red and shining, and, while the youth recounted the story of his Moorish loves, Don Antonio, his eyes half closed, put his handkerchief from time to time to the tap of a little cask of ambar which stood upon an inlaid stool at his right.

When Ramiro had concluded, the ecclesiastic, guided no doubt by the subtle instinct of a confessor, began to talk of witches or *jorguinas*,¹ of magic, spells, amulets and other superstitions of that ilk—the web of the Devil in which so many souls were caught for all eternity. Ramiro took advantage of this opportunity to enquire whether the Notorious Art were contrary to the teachings of the Holy Church of Christ.

“Have you ever meddled therein, my son?” the canon asked in honeyed tones. The youth paused before replying. An unexpected shudder ran through him. The confessor’s eyes were gazing steadily into his own.

“Up to the present, no,” answered Ramiro at length, in a weak voice; “but I have heard others speak of its wonders.”

“Fool that I am! I can never put my finger on the wound!” exclaimed Don Antonio, with a proud smile. “It is perfectly clear to me,” he went on, addressing the youth, “that these loves have set their pestilential seal upon your soul.” Then, rising from his chair and feigning an implacable wrath, he added:

¹ Sorceresses.

“*Vade retro! Vade retro!* Sir Hypocrite, Sir Plague, Sir Wizard, son of Satan! Know, my fine fellow, that your soul is in immediate danger of perdition—if, indeed, it is not already sold to the powers of evil—and that if it were not for the secrecy of the confessional you would be immediately handed over to the familiars of the Holy Office. *Nego absolutionem, nego, nego!* From to-day onwards be tireless in your penance, drive out the devils which possess you, let the priest of your parish anoint and wash you, and have a care lest you end your days at the stake! *In nomine meo daemonia ejicient. Obmutesce et exi ab eo!* *Obmutesce et exi ab eo!* *Obmutesce et exi ab eo!* I shall say no more.”

Ramiro descended the staircase rubbing his eyes and talking to himself like a madman. This terrible man had just spoken to him in obedience to a command from Heaven. It could only be God Himself who, through the mouth of the canon, had given him this warning, this agnition, uttering this awful threat in order to save his soul. It could only be a breath from heaven which had thus rent in twain the veil of his pride, leaving him naked and speechless, like the first man after the Fall.

As though suddenly revealed by a flash of lightning, the deadliest sins of his life rose before his mind’s eye. He saw himself upon the bosom of the Moorish girl entirely forgetful of his faith, his honour, his country. He remembered his false confessions, the lascivious thoughts which he had deliberately encouraged when, during Mass, he had gazed lustfully at the prostrate forms of women; the revolt of his pride against the commandments of God; the weeks during which he had been unwilling to perform a single act of penance, to utter a single prayer. To what could he attribute all this save to his passion for Aixa? Undoubtedly the infidel had, by means of her perfidious and seductive wiles, instilled into his soul something of her own corruption. The priest in the tavern at Cebreros, Moses Raymond, Mendoza, the canon—all had spoken truly.

He felt as though he were being strangled by a serpent. A new and horrible anguish—to wrestle with the Demon! He felt certain that the spell would lose none of its potency, that it could, indeed, never be broken until Aixa was destroyed. The auto-da-fé which was about to take place was his last and only hope.

On that very evening, Ramiro left the Count of Fuensalida's palace and put up at the Sevillian's inn. A few days later, as, shortly before the ringing of the Angelus, he was crossing the Four Streets with Domingo de Aguirre, he saw, approaching along the Calcetería, a brilliant procession marching to the loud noise of drums and hautboys.

"It is the herald of the Holy Office come to proclaim the auto-da-fé," exclaimed the armourer. "If your grace wishes, we can approach."

III

It was one of those June mornings upon which the City of Councils seems to murmur in the language of the Arabs snatches of Oriental songs. The cloudless sky spreads its azure canopy above the town; here and there the whitewashed walls gleam merrily beneath the brown roofs; roses and carnations glow in the verandahs and high above some narrow streets, deliciously shady, one can distinguish the sheen of burnished cupolas and minarets. .

But while the lacquer and the flowers, relics of Moorish grace, shed their lustre upon Toledo, the majority of its citizens had exchanged their ordinary garments for sombre mourning cloaks. There still stood, in the squares and at the cross-roads, the rough wooden platforms, draped in black, upon which, the night before, the friars of the various Orders had, with terrifying eloquence, delivered their harangues; and in the Calle Ancha, the Lencería, the Lonja and the environs of the

parish of St. Vincent, funereal trappings of black velvet hung from nearly all the windows. The very walls were clad in mourning.

Meanwhile, from the early hours of the morning, a restless multitude had paced the Zocodover. The news that an Arab sorceress, endowed by Satan with a terrible beauty, was to be burned this year at the auto-da-fé, soon reached the most remote villages in the district, and pilgrims were not lacking to spread from tavern to tavern the story of the conspiracy and the renegade youth.

Ramiro waited impatiently at the door of the inn. Domingo de Aguirre had promised to come for him, so that they might together witness the auto-da-fé. Shortly afterwards, by a circuitous route, they both entered the square from the Calle Ancha, hoping to see the procession as it passed by. A *caballero*, seated at a low window, recognised Aguirrè and offered them stools. Mounting upon these they succeeded in obtaining a view of the Zocodover in its entirety. It was now completely covered by a closely packed and noisy multitude. To the west, bathed in the morning sunlight, there rose the enormous scaffold, draped in black, which, according to the usual custom, would shortly be occupied by the Holy Inquisition, the municipal officers, the Chapter, the nobility, the dignitaries, and all the clergy. The condemned persons had to mount another scaffold, narrower than the first, but of equal height, which had been erected upon the southern side of the square.

Stirred to the soul by the solemnity of the suspense, Ramiro looked about him in undiscerning astonishment. He scarcely saw the confused glitter of the silver embroidery upon the black velvet trappings of the scaffold, or the arms of the Inquisition, together with those of the monarch, stamped upon the purple canopy which was spread above the scarlet thrones, or, towards the centre of the square, the gold upon the blood-red altar-cloth which was prescribed by the liturgy of the Church for these terrible holocausts. As he gazed, however,

upon the tall green cross shrouded in a dark veil which stood in the centre of the altar, among twelve flaming torches, he shuddered violently, as though God Himself had just spoken to him through these symbolic objects.

The square was filled to overflowing, and it resounded incessantly with the cries of the sightseers who were jostling one another at the openings of the narrow streets. From the Arch of Blood came the sound of shrieks and curses, and at this spot the multitude frothed and foamed like a torrent as it enters a lake. Every verandah, every window, every platform was a compact mass of hidalgos and noble dames. In addition to these a vast concourse of people, who had somehow or other contrived to scale the roofs, covered the tops of the houses; and the whole mob swarmed, hummed, buzzed with the turgid throbbing of a crowd which is intoxicated with the sunshine and a prey to the same impatience.

At last the bells of St. Vincent's begin to toll—announcing the exodus of the criminals; and the soldiers ranged along both sides of the Calle Ancha find it difficult to keep back at the point of their halberds the vast mob whose incessant elbowing and pushing threatens to break down the double wooden fence which extends from the prison and encloses the two scaffolds. The procession approaches. The halberds glitter as it crosses the Calcetería.

When he realised that the Saracen girl was about to pass by him within a few seconds, Ramiro plunged his hand into his pocket and firmly grasped the bronze crucifix. At the head of the procession marched the soldiers of the Faith, proud of the brilliant plumes in their hats and the golden chains which the Holy Tribunal had lent them for the occasion. They were irregulars, armed with halberds, pikes and muskets. They marched with solemn steps, half arrogant, half shamefaced, not daring to look up at the windows. Then came the twelve priests of St. Vincent's parish, with their standard; then, two by two, their mounts draped in black, the

grandees of Spain and nobles of Castile, all in black, but covered with jewels. Some had the arms of the Inquisition embroidered upon their cloaks. Ramiro recognised the Count of Fuensalida by his close-fitting suit of corded silk trimmed with gold, which looked from a distance like damascened armour. The rabble gazed at them in mute attention, and only the clatter of their horses' hoofs upon the cobbles broke the silence. It was like a procession of dark, equestrian statues, black and funereal.

The approach of the first penitents was the signal for a fresh outbreak of shouting on the part of the mob. Twenty wretched creatures or more, bareheaded, without girdles, without hoods, were now filing past, overwhelmed with shame, carrying in their hands an unlighted candle of yellow wax. They had recanted, and were about to receive absolution at the foot of the altar. Nearly all of them were weeping, throwing themselves at the feet of the monks who accompanied them, kissing their hands and their cassocks with deep groans of remorse. Some wore around their necks, as a symbol of the hundreds of blows which they were about to receive, a cord, knotted from end to end, and the mob counted the knots aloud in a dirge of mock contrition in order to augment their confusion. Others could be recognised at a distance by their yellow *sambenitos*,¹ and the multitude, expert in such matters, deduced the nature of their crime and its corresponding punishment merely by observing the daubs upon those cloaks of infamy which represented now half, now the whole of an arm, now both arms of the cross of St. Andrew the Martyr. Carried by the familiars of the Tribunal upon long green sticks, there came by, swaying high above the procession, six huge rag dolls stuffed with straw, amazing puppets with large eyes, painted on the cloth with pitch, and mouths of red ochre, sinister marionettes whose legs, inadequately weighted, danced continually

¹ A garment worn by convicts of the Inquisition.

in space with the convulsive capering of a corpse upon the gallows. As he noticed Ramiro's gesture of surprise, the armourer cried:

"Those are the fugitives and the dead, in effigy—a zealous justice will pronounce judgment upon them." Along the street the crowd which had congregated at the windows and upon the balconies began to sway eerily to and fro. The men leaned over as far as they were able, the women, lifting their eyes to heaven, made the sign of the cross repeatedly upon their lips, their cheeks, their foreheads. Shortly afterwards all shouted with one voice:

"The renegades!"

The armourer had to shout into Ramiro's ear in order to make himself heard:

"Those who are about to die!"

The shouting increased in volume, grew deafening. Soon, from one end of the Zocodover to the other, there resounded the savage roaring of the mob, greedy to swallow up those accursed human dregs of humiliation and terror. Ramiro stood on tiptoe upon his stool.

Two familiars of the Holy Office, together with four soldiers, guarded each of the condemned persons, while a Dominican friar harangued them unceasingly, holding before their eyes the sacred symbol of the crucifix. All of them wore, in addition to the *sambenitos*, the tragic, ludicrous headdress, the yellow *coroza*,¹ upon which were depicted terrible demons surrounded by lurid flames. The ghastly countenances of the condemned revealed by turns terror, rage, fortitude, repentance and even joy. It was a witches' Sabbath, a hellish caravan-serai, and even the morning sunlight took on a sinister glow as it beat down upon the ghastly faces, the long dishevelled tresses of the women, stained with the dust of dungeons and dank with feverish sweat, the terrible eyes which still seemed to retain the expression of horror and supplication provoked by the torture.

¹ A cone-shaped hat of pasteboard worn as a mark of infamy.

No one was permitted to lay hands upon the condemned; but the rabble found an outlet for its spite in heaping curses and insults upon them.

“Ho, ho! martyrs of Satan—you will soon see how it hurts!”

“May they rub a handful of salt into your wounds and a grain of marjoram!”

“Let them put a cracker under this creature’s tail so that her mother can recognise her when she is burning!”

A woman shrieked from a window:

“Repent, wretches! Think of the torments of hell!”

But a boy, sprawling half over the barrier, responded from below, brandishing his clenched fists:

“No, no! . . . To the stake—and let them sup with the Devil!”

Then another explosion of holy and homicidal hatred burst forth from the assembled throats:

“To the stake! To the stake!”

And the criminals started upon their march amid this savage reverberation which sounded like the roaring of innumerable flames.

Many recognised among the condemned a chandler of Orgaz who had claimed to be St. John the Baptist in person and had gone from town to town preaching a new doctrine. The wretched man, halting from time to time, raised his hands to heaven, simulating the gestures of the divine prophet on the banks of the Jordan. A pale girl, who was held by some to be the renegade nun of whom people in Toledo were then talking, listened to the insults of the mob with an expression of tender and infantile curiosity. At times, leaning upon the shoulder of a monk and throwing back her head, she laughed joyously, like one intoxicated. A *morisco*, well known in the district for his foul tongue, made from time to time a rapid and obscene gesture symbolical of the act of copulation. The familiars were obliged to drag him along by the scruff of his neck. An old woman passed by, tall and withered, her hands

pinioned behind her back, her mouth bound with a black kerchief. Ramiro was not long in recognising her as Gulinar. At length the man who had given them the stools exclaimed, gazing up the street:

“Here comes the Saracen girl who bewitched the Christian youth.”

All lips were closed.

Aixa walked at a slow, measured pace, her eyes raised to heaven. Perchance her ears caught the sound of divine rebecks and the music of the heavenly choirs. Perchance her spirit, soaring far above the earth, was enjoying a foretaste of the delights of Alchanna and the sublime rewards which her faith holds in store for its martyrs. Her sinuous form still called up alluring visions of the saraband, and her naked feet moved rhythmically as though the anklets still jingled upon them. Her face was terribly pale, and her mouth, distorted in an incomprehensible smile, such as one sees upon the lips of a corpse, revealed the gleam of her white teeth. After gazing at her for a few moments, Ramiro was obliged to shut his eyes and support himself against the wall, clutching the crucifix once again in order to stamp and sear upon his flesh the image of his Redeemer. He watched the remainder of the procession file by as though in a dream; innumerable priests of every order; familiars on horseback, with their ebony staves inlaid with silver; ecclesiastics upon mules decked in funereal trappings; the chest containing the sentences, borne upon a mule the golden tassels of whose purple accoutrements trailed upon the ground; the scarlet standard of the Faith; the white ruffs, the glittering jewels upon the jet-black robes. . . . At length the armourer, after telling him the name of certain magistrates, touched him upon the arm, exclaiming:

“He who is now approaching is the Cardinal-Archbishop. Note his venerable aspect.”

Mounted upon a strong bay horse, erect and imposing, Don Gaspar de Quiroga, Cardinal-Archbishop of Toledo,

was approaching, surrounded by pages and halberdiers. He was the Pope of Spain, the sacred mask of the king. After the prevailing tone of gloom, his scarlet vestments had the inspiring effect of a blast of trumpets. Apart from his inquisitorial cloak of violet, all his garments, from head to foot, were one blaze of crimson. His forehead was knitted in a stern and saintly frown. He did not stir an eyelash. He passed by, inexorable as the torture; sombre and awe-inspiring as the dreadful holocaust over which he was about to preside; red as the flames of the stake. The saddle of embossed silver, the gold and the pearls upon the amethyst-coloured trappings which reached down to the palfrey's hoofs, sparkled brilliantly in the morning sunshine. No one dared to profane the solemn silence with an *huzza*. The members of this long procession took more than half an hour to settle themselves in their respective seats. The huge scaffold was completely covered by an illustrious multitude. The Inquisitors occupied the centre; the clergy, the north side; the municipal officers and the nobles, the south. The condemned persons, accompanied by the familiars and the monks, filled in their turn the second platform.

All eyes were then directed with eager curiosity towards the stage of abomination and infamy. Upon it were wont to appear sorceresses who had made pacts with the Devil and who hatched at their Sabbaths all kinds of evil schemes to encompass the ruin of their fellow-creatures; Judaisers, who murdered Christian infants so that they might dip a consecrated wafer in their blood and celebrate therewith abominable rites; Lutherans, who sought to overthrow the Holy Church of Christ and spread throughout Spain the plague of heresy; treacherous *moriscos*, who continued to preach the vile doctrines of their sect, and incited their fellows to rebellion and vengeance.

Those who were about to die occupied the loftiest seats. Standing at the end of the street, Ramiro saw them in profile, but was unable to distinguish the Saracen girl.

Two hours later and these wretched victims, like the scapegoat of holy writ, would perish in the flames. The fields and cities would be purified and the God of modern Israel as, seated upon His heavenly throne, He inhaled the sweet savour of the sacrifice, would calm His wrath and let His benediction fall upon the City of Justice, more Catholic than Rome, more zealous in the Faith than Jerusalem of old.

The service commenced. A bishop approached the altar. The deacons removed his sumptuous mitre, encrusted with symbolic gems, a gift from the Chapter. Shortly afterwards, as in the first sacrifices under the old dispensation, a dense cloud of incense rose into the luminous air. When the sermon and the Mass were concluded, the relator administered the oath to the assembled crowd, and Ramiro joined his voice to the "Yes; I swear it!" which burst with one accord, like a deafening clap of thunder, from the lips of the multitude, and which, according to the peasants, was heard for more than a league around.

A chaunter of the cathedral then read through the catalogue of crimes and superstitious offences against the Faith. Then, without further delay, those who had recanted were led into the wooden cage which stood in the centre of the square, in order that they might listen, one by one, in the presence of the people, to the account of their trials and sentences, prior to receiving absolution.

This part of the auto-da-fé occasioned a general ennui. The mob, anxiously awaiting the appearance of the renegades, showed at every moment unmistakable signs of impatience. Aguirre yawned several times, and Ramiro, half closing his eyes, leaned his head against the black tapestry which hung down from one of the windows.

Defenders of fornication, various bigamists, repentant Judaisers, apostate priests, a beggar who had palmed himself off in the villages as a commissioner of the Holy Office, and a few peasants who had uttered oaths and

blasphemies, were condemned to be flogged, imprisoned or sent to the galleys.

A confused murmur made itself heard throughout the square, and many prelates and dignitaries of the Church left their seats in order to take some light refreshment or snatch a rapid meal behind the tiers of seats. The ladies at the windows and upon the balconies withdrew their veils, revealing the far-famed whiteness of their skins, and sipped the cool drinks or nibbled the candied fruits which their admirers offered them. Between his eyelashes, Ramiro caught a glimpse of shimmering silk upon the platforms. The sound of murmured gallantries now reached his ears and, at times, he seemed to inhale the fragrance of feminine perfumes. One could hear the ripple of clear and merry laughter. Overhead, the gentleman who had offered them a stool, was talking to a lady in a low voice. Ramiro could not help hearing what was being said:

“Say fear rather than indifference, milady—for it would ill please me to fall like another Icarus. . . .”

The woman replied:

“Demand your wings, then, of love and not caprice, for the wings of love never melt, although they themselves carry fire.”

“Ah! that skin, that mouth!”

“For heaven’s sake desist, Don Gonzalo—your rings are hurting me.”

As he heard that name, Ramiro suddenly drew himself up and opened wide his eyes that the sunlight might dispel that bitter memory. The sun, now drawing towards the west, blazed down upon the walls opposite, causing the jewels, the jet, the white kid gloves and the gilded fans in the windows and upon the balconies to gleam and sparkle. At last came the turn of those who were condemned to die. A profound emotion silenced every sound. Those wretched creatures who, within two or three hours, would be a revolting mass of charred flesh, entered the cage and

listened to the reading of their sentences, some unmoved, others mad with terror, the lighted taper of green wax trembling in their hands. Gulinar was dragged out half dead; fear had persuaded her to recant. But Aixa, leaving the monk's side, ascended the steps with the mysterious resolution of a somnambulist. Ramiro was surprised to hear her condemned as a renegade, for she had been reconciled five years before in a minor auto-da-fé in Murcia. From the platform, the roofs, the verandahs, the whole square, a thousand voices urged her to recant; but many, who wished to see her burn at the stake without first being strangled, raised shrill cries of protest. Not a word could they wrench from her; and when the friar who accompanied her pointed to the green cross, shrouded in a dark veil, she turned her head, stretching out her right arm with a gesture of hatred and contempt. Then an obscene, brutal vociferation, a frightful roar, like the explosion of a mine, burst out all over the Zocodover. Some peasants rubbed their eyes with their Galician amulets of black jet or with the cross which hung from their rosaries, uttering loud prayers. Next to Ramiro, a village girl, extremely handsome, with her deep black hair plastered down upon her forehead and her ears covered with large silver cones, shouted incessantly: "Go and bewitch the demons! Go and bewitch the demons!" Monks of every order rose to their feet upon the platforms and, with uplifted arms, endeavoured to silence the multitude.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon when the secretary of the Holy Office delivered up the renegades to the *corregidor* and his lieutenants.

The condemned were mounted upon decrepit mules, and the tragic procession filed along the Street of Arms *en route* for the stake. The auto-da-fé went on, but the familiars, in accordance with the new custom, climbed into their saddles to witness the death agonies. The greater part of the mob rushed after them like a torrent.

Aguirre had left more than an hour ago, and Ramiro, descending from his stool, mingled with the crowd, wandering on purposelessly, aimlessly, like a scrap of tragic flotsam. After they had marched for some distance along the banks of the Tajo, the human herd came to a halt upon a flat, open common, the outskirts of the plain. Ramiro, following some mysterious impulse, pushed his way through the crowd up to the line of halberdiers. He then saw, within a few paces of where he was standing, upon a wide, sandy terrace of granite, six posts for the garrotting, with their iron collars, several piles of faggots, and an enormous white cross. Even the symbol of divine charity seemed to have taken on an aspect of revolting cruelty. The wide patch of ground upon which the prisoners were to be burned was quickly covered by a confused agglomeration of friars, executioners and tipstaffs, who surrounded the condemned.

Ramiro witnessed, almost unmoved, the strangling of those who had recanted. Some in their death agonies had shaken off the *corozas*; others still retained them upon their ghastly, hanging heads.

The sun, almost hidden behind a large, ashen cloud, bathed the plain, the hills, the whitewashed cottages in the neighbouring suburb of Antequeruela in a ruddy, golden light. It was a clear, calm evening. An odour of damp earth rose from the plain. At this hour more than one Moorish hand would be opening the dikes in order to water the fields.

Suddenly Aixa appeared at the foot of the stake. Her yellow robes of infamy, smeared with crude, red daubs, glowed in the light of the setting sun with a barbaric, ominous splendour. She looked like the priestess of some fearful cult of immolation and ecstasy about to hurl her sacred body into the flames. A Dominican friar exhorted her unceasingly, and now with prayers, now with threats, brandished before her eyes the image of the crucified Christ: At last all heard the harsh voice of the priest as he cried like a madman:

"For the last time—say that thou abjurest thy diabolical faith."

Aixa shook her head. The constables, the lieutenants and the monks all pointed to the pile of wood prepared for the torment. She again shook her head as before. Then the Dominican, taking her by the shoulders, pushed her towards the executioner.

As though that gesture had snapped the leash which restrained the fury of the mob, twenty or thirty men and women, breaking through the line of soldiers, rushed as though possessed towards the stake in order to rend the infidel in pieces. Those, however, who wished to see her die in the flames, uttered with one voice a loud shriek of protest:

"Do not kill her! Do not kill her!"

The executioners armed themselves with faggots, and Ramiro saw that the point of a halberd which had just been raised to strike was dripping with blood. A peasant, however, succeeded in reaching the girl, striking her a savage blow upon the shoulder with his cudgel. An old woman drove the blade of a pair of scissors, which she had tied to the end of a stick, into the victim's back. A dart, hurled whence no one could tell, pierced her side.

Then four executioners, taking advantage of the growing confusion, lifted Aixa on to the pile and, stripping her to the waist, began to tie her to the post. She relaxed her muscles and threw back her arms in order to aid them in their sacrificial task. Her finely moulded breasts gleamed like ivory in the light of the setting sun.

When the first flames, almost invisible, began to lick the soles of her feet, Aixa, raising her eyes to heaven, fixed them upon the slender crescent of the moon which shone faintly above the city in a cloud of gold. The faggots, fanned by enormous bellows, began to crackle. From time to time the smoke was lit up by lurid tongues of flame which flickered for a moment and then vanished into space. Aixa remained motionless. Her long tresses were aflame. Her petticoat, which they had not removed,

suddenly caught fire. A terrible, convulsive shudder ran through her limbs. Then a tall column of smoke and flames suddenly enveloped her, swirling up with an appalling rapidity through the evening twilight. The fire roared. Suddenly the first gust of the night wind, driving back the thick black cloud, revealed Aixa's head, hanging limply from the post like some terrible, nightmare fruit.

Ramiro shuddered violently as he gazed upon that terrible vision, and an unexpected anguish tightened his throat as he recalled the seductive beauty of that delicious body which the flames had just consumed. But in his soul a mysterious something strangled this nascent tenderness, reminding him that the black smoke of the fire was his abominable sin, his lasciviousness, his dishonour, crumbling into ashes, vanishing utterly, to be borne away upon the winds of space, leaving no trace behind.

He forced himself to feel an immense relief; he forced himself to think with joy that the terrible eyes of the Moorish girl had burst and broken in the flames; that her accursed flesh was now a confused burning mass which fell, bit by bit, into the ashes; that her mysterious power and her diabolical spells had been engulfed, together with her soul, in the nethermost depths of hell; and, as he felt the tears trickling down his cheeks, he fell upon his knees at the feet of the crowd, crying loudly:

“ O Holy, Holy Inquisition, thy justice has redeemed me, thy stake has saved my soul! ”

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The bodies of the other renegades were already no more than a burning mass of flesh upon an enormous pile of glowing coals, around which the townspeople swirled and eddied, their faces lit up by the flickering gleams as they pointed out to one another among the flames human limbs which shuddered from time to time as though they were still alive and suffering. Now

and then a peculiar hissing, followed by a sharp crackling, could be heard, as though a lump of suet had been hurled into the embers, and Ramiro heard above his head obscene cries and horrible bursts of laughter which disturbed his spirit. Asphyxiated by the terrible stench of this tragic human holocaust, he was at length obliged to rise to his feet and, muffling himself up in his cloak, proceeded as far as he could in the direction of the city, talking to himself and uttering incessant prayers and ejaculations. The paths were shrouded in gloom.

Towards the west, upon the gloomy, smoke-laden horizon, a narrow band of ruddy light was slowly fading into darkness, like the dying glow of a furnace.

IV

EXCITED by the great hope which had just flamed in his heart, Ramiro was unable to snatch a moment's sleep throughout the whole night. At the same time, his mind was filled, against his will, with importunate visions of the past, like a swollen river fouled by the mud from its own banks.

He experienced an overwhelming desire for solitude, a horror of all voices other than his own, of all strange faces.

He left the inn after five o'clock in the afternoon and made for the rugged hills of the south. As he was crossing St. Martin's bridge, a cloaked woman barred his way and with a graceful gesture lifted her veil, to let it fall again with lightning rapidity. Ramiro, nevertheless, at once recognised Casilda's eyes, and instead of remaining to talk with her, drew his cloak about him and hastened at full speed towards the other bank.

After wandering on for more than half an hour in a south-westerly direction, keeping close to the river, he caught sight of a crucifix among the boulders. It was the cross which surmounted a hermitage, built upon the

very edge of an abyss. He approached; and in spite of his acute mental anguish, the unexpected view left him momentarily absorbed, exciting within him an emotion edifying to his soul.

Facing him, upon the opposite bank, Toledo spread from east to west its gray roofs, its white walls, its innumerable turrets, rising up one behind another upon the lofty crag. A smooth and precipitous escarpment fell from the city down into the depths of the gorge, covered, so it seemed, with a fine coating of gray ash, as though the fires of God had swept over it, destroying every root, every seed. Ramiro thought with religious awe of the heights which, as a punishment for their sins, lost souls must scale with hands and feet, only to fall once more into the ocean of flame, ever climbing and ever falling throughout eternity, without hope of respite or of pardon.

He seated himself upon a boulder.

Away down below in those terrible depths the river wound its way among fierce, rust-coloured rocks. It looked to him like a river of crime and expiation, such as the imagination conjures up at the thought of hell. One would have said that down there in the depths a procession of mournful spectres was passing by, their long dark veils brushing the water.

Meanwhile, as twilight fell, the houses gleamed white and desolate as bones scattered upon desert sands, and the whole city, seen at a distance through the trembling haze of evening, looked like a city of another world, a city outside time and space, mystic, filled with a passionate longing, like the psalms of David.

Upon the loftiest crag rose the Alcázar, bathed in the melancholy glow of the twilight. Ramiro, as though mysteriously inspired, remembered that those walls had sheltered one of the most illustrious monarchs in history, a king of kings, who had finally abandoned his sceptre and his crown to take refuge from the world in a remote monastery. Then, on a sudden, the vision of the

Emperor Charles V rose up before his eyes, its face half concealed beneath a monkish hood.

Ah! the master of the world, clad in sackcloth!

The sun sank behind the hills, and the city was bathed in a dull violet glow, as though one gazed at it through a clear amethyst. Some windows which had for an instant appeared to burst into flame, were again veiled in shadow. Ramiro allowed the holy calm to take possession of his soul. Perchance it heralded a sign, a voice from on high. At that moment the bells of the city began to toll the Angelus. The distant notes rang out in a prolonged and moving harmony which reminded him of the litanies for the departed. It seemed as though the crag which supported all those belfries were itself vibrating, like the wooden case of an organ. Ramiro remembered the bells of Ávila; the evenings which, as a child, he had spent in the turret of the manor; his mother, ever weeping, ever clad in mourning, ever silent.

He said the Aves. He was redeemed, purified, but his soul was weary, thirsty like the bed of a river scorched dry by the sun. He wanted to enter the hermitage, there to pour out his deep anguish at the foot of the altar. He rose to his feet. Around him the sun and the rocks seemed to tremble. His body, mysteriously buoyant, was surely about to rise from the ground. Suddenly a flame, a burning dart hurled from above, seemed to pierce his heart, and for a few seconds he was plunged into a state of ecstasy which his soul alone enjoyed.

Then it passed. He thought that he had been transfixed, like Mother Teresa de Jesús, and that God had descended upon him, in all His glory, all His compassion, that he, Ramiro, might take just one sip from the chalice of delights which awaited him when his soul, victorious over the world, at last embraced with passionate eagerness a life of solitude and penance.

A moment later he was on his way to the city in search of a monastery where he might exchange his nobleman's cloak for a hermit's gown.

V

CLAD in coarse sackcloth, the humble wallet which the Franciscan nuns of St. John the Penitent's had prepared for his journey dangling from the end of the staff which he carried over his shoulder, Ramiro left Toledo on the following morning, making across the mountains towards the south.

His hair was brushed back from his forehead, no longer lined with care, and his eyes were wet with tears.

From sunrise to sunset, he tramped for many days, lying face downwards upon the ground to drink the water of streams, and devouring the crusts which the peasants gave him. More than one sympathetic traveller offered to let Ramiro mount up behind him on his horse, but the youth only smiled with saintly resignation, pressing the soles of his sandals more firmly into the dust. He slept in the courtyards of inns or by the roadside, wherever he happened to be when night came on.

At last, early one morning, after a long and weary tramp, he saw from a hill-top the white city of Cordova, bathed in the liquid, ruddy light of the dawn. He asked a passing fruit seller to point out to him the convent of the Carmelite nuns, and when he remembered that his mother lived beneath that roof, now so near to him, he could scarcely breathe for sobbing.

He did not wish to approach the city and, leaving the beaten track, he at length found upon the side of a mountain a grotto hidden among a rank growth of bracken and brushwood. Inside was a rough table made out of the unpeeled branches of a cork-tree, an inkwell carved from the root of an orange-tree, a stool, a hoe, and various pots and pans embedded in the mud. A nobleman's cloak, old and threadbare, hung upon the wall, and also, like two smoked hams; a pair of travelling boots from which the spurs had not been removed.

On that same night, when he had lit the candle which he had brought with him and retired to sleep upon a heap of dead leaves, he found, at the back of the grotto, the mummified body of an old anchorite, whose withered fingers still clutched the beads of his rosary. Ramiro fell upon his knees and, raising his hands to heaven, gave thanks to God for having placed upon his path the desired refuge and the example of this holy death.

The next morning he buried the hermit and tidied up as well as he was able the interior of the gloomy retreat in which he had made up his mind to spend the remainder of his days.

Very soon he felt a sublime ecstasy flood his soul. Incessant prayer, utter contempt for the vanities of the world and, above all, the arduous and ingenious penances which he devised for himself, brought him to a knowledge of the ineffable pride of holiness; a majestic pride which seemed to dilate his soul infinitely, raising it in a sublime exaltation far above the wretchedness of men. He likened himself to the great anchorites of the Thebaid, and he felt confident that in time to come the story of his life would be read by firesides and in refectories for the edification of souls.

The nuns of Toledo had placed in his wallet certain mystical works, and guided by these he set himself to follow the three spiritual paths described in the treatises, that he might at length attain to that sublime glory which he had sought up to the present by devious and delusive ways.

But the ardour of the first few days was not sustained. He no longer experienced those fiery ecstasies which lit in the crypt of his soul the flaming lamps of which St. John of the Cross speaks in his works. The cold night of darkness fell once more upon his heart; the gloom and dampness of his den began to weary him. He grew to loathe his books.

Sometimes, in the evening, eager for a breath of fresh air, he would pace the mountain-side until nightfall.

The breeze was always delicious and it wafted from the farms a perfume of orange-blossom which enfeebled his will and drove out of his mind all thoughts of penance. The smiles of women, the rich carmine of parted lips, the roguish play of eyelashes, rose up before him in the ruddy twilight or in the blue haze among the trees.

As though some spell had been cast upon him, an apathy, an invincible idleness began to paralyse his limbs and his spirit. He would now spend the greater part of the day lying at full length upon the hermit's bed, idly counting the holes in the rock or the drops of water which trickled down the walls. At last lizards, cockroaches, rats and many creatures whose names were unknown to him, ventured to climb and crawl over his body. Instead of scaring them away, he lay quite still that he might observe more closely all their movements.

He allowed whole weeks to pass by without saying a single rosary and without going into the city to hear the Sunday Mass and beg for food as had been his wont.

One morning he heard a woman's voice within a few steps of his cave:

They sing of Oliver, they sing of Roland
But not of Zurraquín, who was a knight so grand.

They sing of Roland and they sing of Oliver
And not of Zurraquín, who was a great cavalier.

It was the burden of a refrain which Medrano, the steward, had never tired of singing. He thought he recognised Casilda's voice. Were his senses deceiving him? He rose to his feet and glanced outside. A woman, wearing a thick green veil, was rapidly descending the slope. The pretty song grew fainter and fainter as she disappeared.

Another morning, as he was gathering sticks around his cave, he found at the foot of a tree a sword coated with rust. He took it into his den and rubbed it vigorously with wet sand. It was a nobleman's weapon. Several bands of silver encircled the black leather

sheath. The blade bore the trade mark of Hortuño. The hilt was open work, fine as lace.

This trivial incident roused him from his sloth. From that time he would spend hour upon hour in cleaning every corner and cranny of the sword, and he took a keen delight in seeing the blade flame and sparkle in the sunlight, in brandishing it violently, in hearing it whistle through the air.

He now never went into the woods without it. Sometimes, glancing from side to side as though he feared lest someone might catch him unawares, he would plunge the point into the tree trunks in order to recall the terrible lunge which had killed Gonzalo.

His blood burned once again like fire, and his spirit, inflated by the wind of honour, yearned once more for the triumphs and praises of the world. His mind dwelt upon all the great deeds which it might have been his to perform.

One September evening, seated upon a boulder, he was turning over in his mind the idea of visiting his mother in the near future, when he saw ascending the hill, mounted upon a gray mule, a tall, lean old man who, craning his neck, gazed intently in the direction of the cave.

He reappeared on the following morning, always casting the same mysterious glances in Ramiro's direction.

At length, one day when Ramiro was tortured by insufferable agonies of hunger, the mysterious old man happened to pass by as night was falling—carrying before him upon his saddle a small basket of loaves, a string of onions hanging over his shoulder.

Ramiro went towards him crying:

“ For the love of God, give me an onion and a slice of bread! ”

The man went on his way.

Then Ramiro, in a louder and more threatening voice, repeated:

“ For the love of God, give me a piece of bread! ”

But the stranger, barely slackening the pace of his mule, replied coldly:

“ You would do better to go and earn it with your own hands. Do you think, perchance, that this dirty, idle life which you are leading can blot out the stain of crimes and perjuries? ”

Ramiro stepped in front of the mule and, seizing the bridle with one hand, while in the other he flourished the bronze crucifix, repeated:

“ Give me, I implore you, a few crumbs, in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ! ”

Then the old man leaned forward in his saddle and, as his sole reply, spat twice upon the sacred image of the Redeemer. Ramiro uttered a cry of horror. His body trembled, a prey to two conflicting impulses. At length, dashing into the cave, he seized the sword and ran straight towards the stranger, intending to kill him on the spot. But as he lifted the blade in order to plunge it into the blasphemer’s heart, a powerful, imperious voice, a voice which thrilled him to the marrow, suddenly restrained him:

“ Alas, Ramiro, there now remains only one crime for thee to commit—that of murdering the one who begot thee! ”

As he uttered these words the traveller removed his broad-brimmed hat, baring his head to reveal his face more clearly. Ramiro was deeply moved. He had recognised the mysterious stranger of the Santiago quarter, the renegade *morisco* who had saved his life and given him as a memento the precious Moorish dagger.

“ Yes, thou art my son by the haughty Doña Guiomar,” the old man went on, “ and thy grandfather, out of hatred for my race and creed, chose rather that she should marry old Don Lope than become my wife. Then, at Ávila, I gave thee life a second time, delivering thee out of the hands of the faithful. For that I was driven out of Castile as a traitor. But thou, Ramiro,

hast repaid me in good Christian coin for, false to thine oath, thou hast betrayed to the Inquisition the unhappy Gulinar and Aixa, Aixa the noble, Aixa the saintly, that they might be cast into the flames, after they had cured thee and tended thee, lavishing upon thee all their love!"

His eyes filled with tears and his voice shook when at last he spoke again:

"Ah! I will not curse thee, for a father's curse is always heard by Allah. . . . No, no, I dare not curse thee! . . ."

With these words he motioned with his left hand behind him and, violently spurring the mule, allowed the whole bundle of loaves to fall to the ground. Soon he was out of sight behind the rocks. Ramiro watched him ride away without making any attempt to call him back and, walking towards the cave, went to sit down in the darkest corner, clasping the crucifix to his heart.

What had he just heard? His father—a *morisco*! He recalled all the enigmas of his life: his lonely childhood, his grandfather's harshness, the incessant weeping and melancholy of Doña Guiomar, the strange rumours which had been circulated concerning his adventure with the *moriscos*, Beatrice's sudden disdain, Gonzalo's insult in the street . . . the unselfish love of that man of an alien race, an alien faith!—and he saw how clear and comprehensible everything seemed in the light of this terrible revelation. Was it indeed true? Was he really the son of a Moor? Ah! in that event it would be better for him to open his veins and allow his blood to fall upon the muddy soil of this gloomy cave. His mind reeled in a whirlpool of black despair. His thoughts seemed to moan and howl like the wind on a stormy night. He would not, *would* not allow himself to think, and he drove his nails deep into the flesh of his forehead in a wild endeavour to divert his thoughts, waving his arms in the darkness, panting as though mad with terror. But the thought imposed itself, ever more

inexorable, ever more eloquent, ever more profound. At times he laughed his own credulity to scorn, brushing aside the words of the Moor as the most preposterous of absurdities; at others he felt completely convinced of their truth, and was amazed that up to the present, amid so many clear indications, he had not harboured the slightest suspicion of the truth. Suddenly the very horror of this uncertainty compels him to rise to his feet. He lights the candle. A sudden thought has flashed across his mind. He climbs upon the stool, takes down the old suit and the boots which are hanging from the roof of the cave. A purse of money jingles in the pocket of the breeches.

When he had exchanged his hermit's cloak for these garments of another age and girded on his sword, he left the cave and began to wander aimlessly through the night. His only idea was to hasten untiringly towards the sea, his only hope the galleons.

He dreamed of some region in the Indies where the plants, the fruit, the birds, the stars would all be strange to him, where nothing could recall the old, malignant country which had given him birth, that land where all was ill fortune, evil-doing, wizardry. Only thus could he escape the curse which seemed to have pursued him from his mother's womb.

He tramped on untiringly, impelled like Ahasuerus by a mysterious blast which did not stir the leaves of the trees and yet which he, with all his strength, could not resist.

By night, in taverns, as they saw him enter, clad in his antiquated garments, his beard long and tangled, more than one peasant drained his glass at one gulp and rushed out into the yard, making the sign of the cross upon his forehead.

But by day, as he tramped through the villages, the children would mock him, pelting him with nutshells and handfuls of mud.

With the money which he had found in the breeches

of the suit he bought a mule in order that he might proceed more quickly on his journey and a cloak wherewith to cover himself. Thus after innumerable wanderings he at length arrived, towards the middle of December, in the city of Cadiz.

On that very day, as he paced the streets, he saw the banner of a regiment hanging from a window. He asked for the captain and they told him that he had left the night before for Jerez. He was about to go on his way when a soldier, seated upon a bench beside the door, exclaimed:

“ If your grace, Señor *caballero*, wishes to speak with Pablo Martínez, the ensign, there he is upon your right.”

Ramiro turned his head and judge of his surprise when he saw, crossing the street, his former page clad in the gay uniform of a soldier.

Pablillos had just arrived back from Flanders. In a skirmish near Gröningen two companies of Spanish musketeers, surprised by the enemy, had taken to their heels and fled. Only Pablillos had remained at his post without turning a hair. Upon the following day they found him on the same spot, lying flat upon his belly. He had lost the use of his tongue and was covered with bruises. For this he had been promoted to the rank of ensign. Later some had said with reference to this exploit that Pablillos had been too scared to move a limb; others that he had crouched beneath the carriage of a culverin. But the new recruits now looked upon him as a hero, and the whole town regarded him as the glory of Cadiz. Recognising Ramiro, he promised to help him so far as he was able, and when he knew of his decision to enter the regiment as a soldier he himself took his old master to purchase what was necessary for the voyage. They were due to sail for Peru at the end of December.

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On the twenty-fourth day of that month, after six

o'clock in the evening, three huge galleons left the harbour, spreading one by one their numerous sails, tipped in the evening light with a sudden gleam of red and gold.

In one of them was Ramiro, looking out over the bulwarks, his mind, his whole soul intent upon the stupendous promise of the horizon.

The three lanterns upon the prow were lit, and the ships set out upon their voyage to America.

Meanwhile, far away on shore, near the cape of St. Philip, a young girl, her shoes torn and tattered, lay face downwards upon the last rock, gazing through her tears at the gradually receding lights, growing ever fainter, ever more distant. The tide, gradually cutting off the reef, played in the folds of her threadbare green cloak, stifling her sobs, carrying away her tears upon its bosom as, amid the mocking laughter of the foam, it murmured into her ear its wild and pitiless song.

EPILOGUE

PERU, 1605, in the “Ciudad de los Reyes.” A night towards the end of October. The city slumbers beneath a blaze of stars. Here and there, blacker than the darkness, its belfries tower to the skies. Millions of fireflies and glow-worms light their tiny lamps above the orchard and flit in and out among the sombre trees. The moist air is heavy with perfumes, and, as in the calm silence of the fields, the concert of the frogs and grasshoppers can be heard, interrupted only by the cry of the night-watchman or the noisy footsteps of some reveller returning from the gaming-house.

Gradually the peaks of the San Cristóbal and Amancaes mountains are suffused in a drowsy, rubescent glow. A faint, languorous breeze is wafted from the sea. It is not yet cock-crow.

Not far from the Plaza Mayor, in the tiny garden of a humble dwelling, a woman, whose white dress seems to shine in the gloom, paces up and down the walks like a restless ghost. It is Rose, the younger daughter of Gaspar Flores and María de Oliva. Every morning before sunrise, she piously gathers, in the little garden cultivated with her own hands, the flowers which a moment later she will place before the shrine of the Virgin of the Rosary in the neighbouring Church of St. Dominic. Even upon the darkest of nights her eyes can distinguish which blossoms are the fullest, and she fancies that they are calling to her mysteriously, eager to die upon the chaste bosom of the altar.

In one corner of the garden, the little door of a white-washed cell frames in the darkness the golden splendour of a lighted taper. It is the domestic hermitage which Rose has constructed that she may lead a life of

contemplation and penance without deserting her parents and her brothers.

She has not chosen this life under the impulse of remorse or sorrow. She is a born saint: miraculous from the cradle. With her first breath a zephyr from Paradise was wafted through the house. She is the conventional lily, blessed by God in the earth and in the seed. It seems as though the angels watch over and direct her every undertaking. Those who visit her sense about her person the light and fragrance of another world; and at night, in the darkest rooms, she can be recognised by the mysterious radiance which plays about her hair.

She is not yet twenty years of age, and everyone in Lima knows of the amazing prodigies which the Lord has vouchsafed unto her. She alone finds it natural that the birds should perch upon her shoulder or accompany with their warbling the devout songs which she improvises to the sound of her guitar; or that in days of great need, when her mother or sisters are ill, wonderful embroidery should suddenly appear beneath her needle, covering the materials one by one without exhausting the skeins. She has early come to understand that suffering and poverty are, in the sight of God, the greatest blessings of this life; and she continually visits the hospitals, the huts of the *cholos*¹ and Indians, seeking out those afflicted by fevers, ulcers, leprosy. She shelters in her oratory the old women who ransack heaps of refuse in order to find their daily food; she tends with her own hands those who, attacked by the bubonic plague or cancer, have been abandoned by their relatives.

Her beauty is at once angelical and disturbing. Of the votive candle she has the whiteness and the flame. Her large eyes, which glow with a mysterious fire, excite, against her will, violent passions in the hearts of rich and virtuous gentlemen. Her mother wishes her to marry, and obliges her to adorn herself like other maidens. But Rose secretes in every gewgaw a hidden mortification.

¹ Half-castes.

The garland of flowers with which she has to bind her hair conceals a crown of thorns; her perfumed gloves are smeared with a caustic which sears her palms. At length, overwhelmed by threats and violence, she declares her irrevocable vow of virginity and her secret betrothal to Christ.

One night, after working to a late hour by the light of a candle, she dreamed that she was preparing the nuptial robe for her divine espousals, embroidering upon the golden cloth the Nine Choirs of Angels and the symbols of the Trinity and the Holy Eucharist. Suddenly it seems as though the needle is taken from her hands. A pale angel, with jet-black curls, appears, shining, before her. He offers her a crown of tears and a white robe made out of lepers' scabs—a gift from Our Divine Lord. Then he unfolds the nuptial veil, an immaterial veil, visible only to the eyes of the soul, a veil woven out of the tears and sighs of this world.

Rose opens the little door with infinite care so that she shall not disturb the sleepers. She leaves the house, pressing to her bosom the flowers which she is about to offer to the Virgin. She walks slowly, the simple white folds of her tunic scarcely stirring. It seems that the intoxicating perfume of the flowers causes her to swoon from time to time. Above the houses the dawn is breaking, rosy, opalescent. Here and there the thatch of the roofs droops over the street like dank, fair hair. The doors are opened one by one. As one passes by the latticed windows one inhales the smoke of perfumed incense which has just been kindled in the halls of convents. Here and there a naked arm appears noiselessly between the lattices and waters the pots of basil in the windows. The timid humming of the slaves who are washing the *patios* and vestibules reaches the ears.

Rose enters the church, treading the sombre tiles with religious awe. Two waxen tapers are burning near the high altar. Their sad, uncertain light reveals, within a black coffin, the folded hands of a corpse and the yellow

gown of sackcloth which serves it as a shroud. Not a single flower, not a prayer, not a mortuary cloth.

The girl approaches the coffin. A Dominican friar, bearded and untonsured, is drowsing within a few paces of the bier, seated upon a stool. Rose walks towards him. The novice then opens his eyes and mutters, as though afraid:

“ Glory be to God! I was dreaming of her, and I saw her come in this very robe, this very veil, carrying those flowers!” Then, endeavouring to conceal his astonishment, he adds gently:

“ May the Lord watch over you, holy maiden. What lips are better fitted than yours to pray for the soul of this dead man?”

“ Who was he?” asks Rose, gazing into the corpse’s face.

“ I, too, do not know exactly who he was,” answers the friar. “ He would never reveal his name or his origin. Men say, however, that the ‘Tragic Cavalier,’ as we all called him, was a great penitent, and that the wonderful story of his conversion should be upon every lip, as an example to sinners.”

The friar hesitates for a moment. Then, gazing ecstatically at the young girl, as though he were addressing the apparition of a saint, he adds in trembling tones:

“ I met him at Huancavélica, about six years ago. There he had got together a troop of bandits, of which the Demon willed I should become a member. Then we set out in search of *enterrados*,¹ as they call them, and old tombs and hidden mines. With the aid of cord and iron we obtained all we desired. We captured the *caciques*² and put them to the torture, and if they would not reveal their secrets we rushed upon their huts and gorged ourselves with blood. Ah! never was there fury such as ours! Afterwards we came to the city of Lima in order to spend the fruit of our crimes in vice. . . . I could say much more, but this is not the time.” Rose

¹ Buried treasure.

² Native chieftains.

sighed; and the novice buried his face in his hands. Then, raising his head, he went on with his story:

“Oh, might and majesty of God! by what devious ways dost thou enlighten souls plunged into darkness! You must know that this man who has now gone to his eternal rest, once came with me to take Communion in this parish, for he never forsook the Blessed Sacrament. Seeing you ~~come~~ out through the door of the sacristy, he instantly left me and began to follow you. Although he was informed later of your piety and of how far removed you were from all the vanities and passions of the world, he determined, nevertheless, to seduce you, or abduct and violate you by force. With this end in view, he ordered me one morning to approach your house with a litter, while he scaled the wall of the garden.

“After an hour had passed by I saw him return, his face entirely changed. When he reached me, he threw his arms around my neck, exclaiming: ‘She is a saint, a bride of Christ; it is He who speaks through her lips!’ and he groaned like one who dares not draw from his bosom the dart by which it has just been pierced. Thenceforth he began to watch you from a distance, and everywhere he saw you engaged in works of Christian mercy. A holy envy stirred his hard heart when he heard the blessings which the unfortunate shower upon you, when he saw so many miserable creatures throw themselves upon their knees in order to kiss your feet. He abandoned his life of luxury, divided his jewels and money among the needy, and—as I too was afflicted by his holy frenzy—he took me with him out into the fields that we might uproot therein by our good works all the evil we had sown. Upon my faith, I could never have conceived of so deep a remorse!—and what works of charity and penance! May God forgive his sins, and grant me also time to purge myself of mine own in this holy monastery.”

“And how did he die?” asked the girl, with a timid, anxious expression, seating herself upon the edge of the stool.

"His death," answered the novice, "bears faithful witness to the sincerity of his contrition. Towards the month of August, a native whom he was curing of a terrible disease of the bone was forced to work in the mine which goes by the name of 'the Fetid,' at Huancavélica. The Tragic Cavalier insisted upon taking his place and, disguised as an Indian, spent more than five hours daily in the bowels of the earth. It was thus that he contracted a fever, so violent that in less than a week he was unable to move a limb. I could think of nothing better than to put him upon a mule and bring him to this monastery of the Rosary where, after prolonged suffering, he died last night at nine o'clock, edifying the monks with his words of humility and sublime trust in the mercy of God. And now I must tell you," he added at length, his voice trembling with emotion, "that in his last moments he uttered your name, O holy maiden, in one breath with those of Christ and Our Lady!"

Rose approached the coffin. How could she doubt it? She was in the presence of the body of the stranger who had one morning scaled the wall of her garden, and to whom, without giving him time to open his lips, she had spoken at length upon the true and divine Love, in words which had, doubtless, been inspired by Heaven. She then gazed intently upon the worn, emaciated face. When she saw the ineffable joy which hovered about the lids, she knew that those eyes had beheld, before they closed in death, a dazzling vision of Paradise.

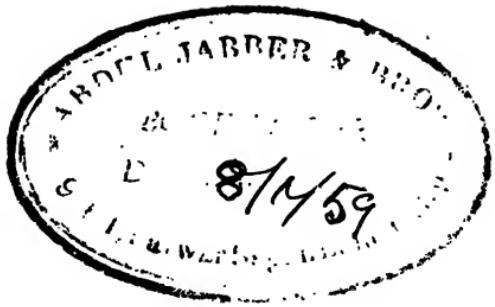
She let fall upon his breast a flower, then another, and another. . . .

The church was but dimly illuminated by the early morning light which fell in livid splendour through the stained-glass windows, and the veil of incense drowsing in the naves was rent from time to time, as though the wings of angels were beating in the gloom.

Rosedé Santa María fell devoutly upon her knees and murmured a prayer for the soul of the dead man lying there.

... And that was the ~~MIS~~ glory of Don Ramiro.

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